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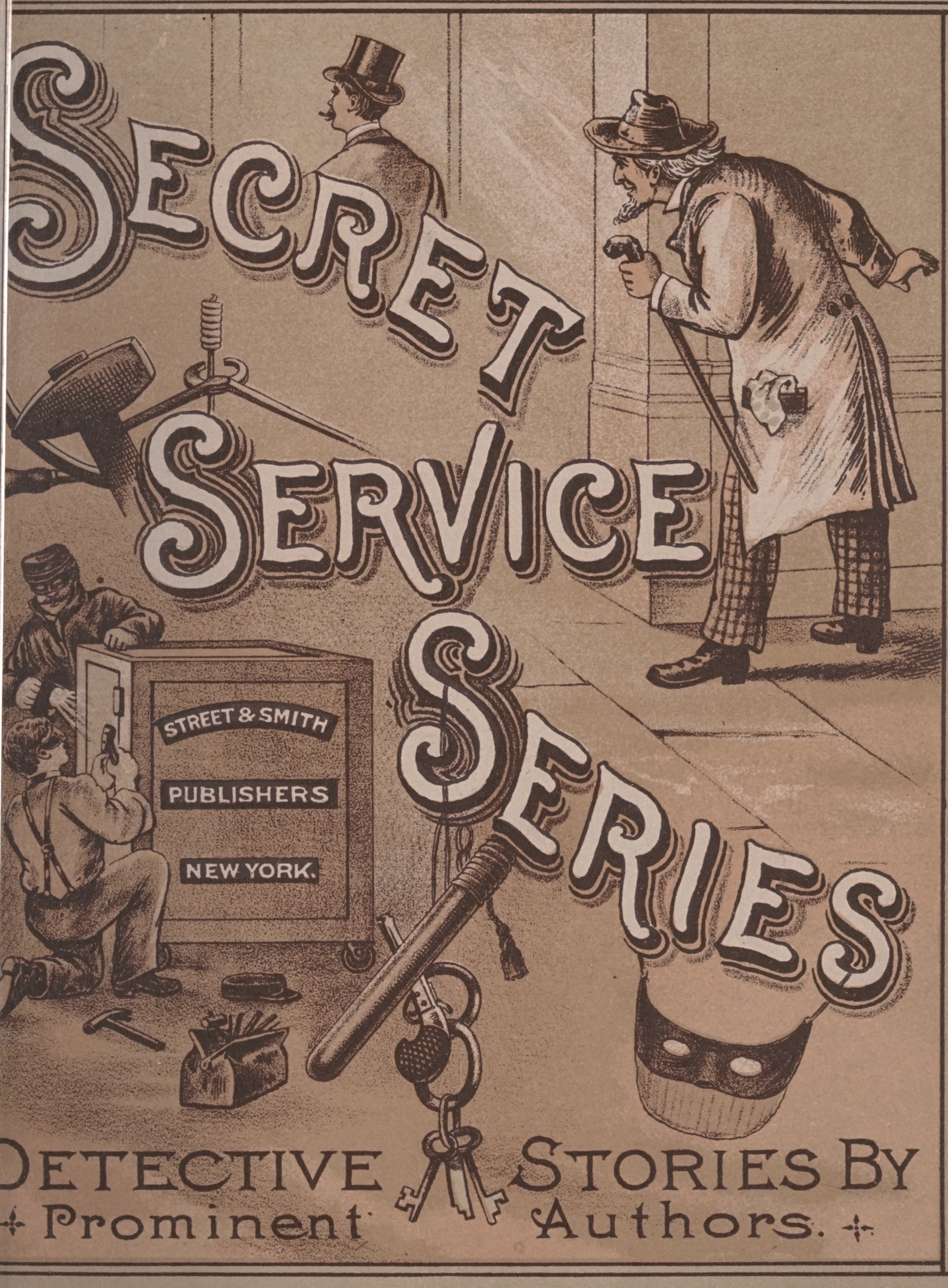

DETECTIVE STORIES BY Prominent Authors.

JULIAN BLAIN, IN HIS FIERCE ANGER, SPRANG TOWARD THE DETECTIVE WITH CLENCHED HANDS.—(P. 18.)

THE SECRET SERVICE SERIES—NO. 26.
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UNDER HIS THUMB;

OR,

THE RIVAL DETECTIVES' CLEWS.

BY

DONALD J. McKENZIE.

40

AUTHOR OF

"THE WALL STREET WONDER," "THE GRAND PARK SENSATION," ETC.

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UNDER HIS THUMB.

CHAPTER I.

THE PRINTING-HOUSE TRAGEDY.

The sharp report of a pistol rang through the great printing-house of Blain & Waldron.

And almost simultaneously a loud, clear voice shouted:

"Waldron has killed himself!"

Not less than fifty of the employees of the establishment heard the pistol shot, and half that number heard and understood the cry.

As this fact has an important bearing upon the great mystery which was speedily to be developed, the reader will please bear it in mind.

None heard the sounds more distinctly than Steve Lawton, a young apprentice, who chanced at the moment to be "sorting pi" in an apartment directly over the counting-room.

The youngster dropped the handful of type that he held at the instant, and darted toward the stairway.

At the foot of the stairs he collided with George Dyer, the foreman of one of the composing-rooms,

and was brought to a halt by a powerful grasp upon his arm.

Dyer gave the lad a violent shaking, with the gruff remark:

"I'll teach you better than to run over a fellow in that way!"

Steve struggled to free his arm, retorting:

"Let go of me, won't yer? You ain't my boss. I tell yer, let go!"

But Dyer clung to him tenaciously, only too glad of this chance to vent the natural spitefulness of his disposition upon a young apprentice.

"Where are you going in such a rush?" he demanded, giving Steve another shake.

"Going to see who is shot," the boy replied.

"You go back to work. You are not a cop yet, so you are not obliged to run every time you hear a pistol fired."

"I guess I've a right to find out what's the matter. I heard somebody say that Mr. Waldron had killed himself. Mr. Waldron is a friend of mine, he is. He picked me up out of the street, and took me in to learn the trade. If he's shot, then I'm jest going to know, and don't you forgit it!"

Steve was both angry and horrified.

That others had heard the shot and cry he knew because of the hurrying footsteps in all parts of the great building.

Doors opened and closed; there was a confusion of excited voices; girls, boys, men, and women ran hither and thither, white, horrified, and breathless.

"What has happened?"

"Shot, did you say?"

"Mr. Waldron killed?"

"It can't be possible!"

Such were the excited utterances on all sides; but no coherent reply was made to any of them.

The clanking of the great printing presses in the basement had ceased, and from below a great number of men and boys poured into the passage-way where Steve and the young foreman had encountered each other.

None of them seemed to know which way to turn. Some thought the sounds proceeded from one of the upper rooms; to others it seemed as though the pistol report was in the street, or the adjoining building.

Several stopped to question Dyer, and this gave Steve the desired opportunity.

He adroitly freed his arm from the young man's grasp, and before the latter could again seize him the lad reached the next door-way, and darted through.

In another moment Steve was at the door of the counting-room. It was closed, and as yet no one had arrived upon the scene. Evidently, to all save the young apprentice, the startling sounds had appeared to proceed from another quarter of the building.

But the lad, being directly over the room in question at the moment, could not have been deceived.

He was surprised to find the door closed. It was customary during business hours to allow all the doors communicating with the counting-room and main office to stand open.

"This is a queer go!" Steve exclaimed, aloud.

His hand rested upon the knob, but an indefinable dread caused him to hesitate.

He listened intently for a moment. He could hear footsteps coming and going in all parts of the build-

ing; but from within the counting-room not a sound proceeded.

Steve was a plucky lad; there was not a timid hair about him; yet, as he turned the knob and slowly opened the door, his form was convulsed by a violent shudder.

He crossed the threshold, and again listened before venturing to glance about the room.

How still it was! A cold current of air swept past, rustling some papers upon the row of desks behind the long railing, and with it came the pungent odor of burned powder.

Instantly Steve was aroused to action. He heard nearer footsteps, this time unmistakably approaching the counting-room. He saw, first, an open window, beyond which was a narrow court inclosed by grim stone walls. Upon the floor were several newspapers, evidently blown thither by the draught. This was all there was to be seen outside the desk-railing, and Steve hastened to open the lattice-door leading to the private quarters of the clerks and proprietors.

He cast a single swift glance across the space beyond. Then he drew back, his face growing white, a gasp of horror parting his lips.

As he turned he found himself face to face with Mr. Blain, the senior member of the firm.

"What is it, boy? What has happened?" that gentleman exclaimed, in a husky voice.

"Look for yourself, sir. It's awful! awful!"

So much the boy managed to articulate, and without waiting to see or hear more, he darted past the throng of employees who had followed Mr. Blain into the room.

An instant later an alarm was rung at the nearest

police station, and Steve Lawton, the young apprentice, was at the other end of the wire.

He had scarce sounded the signal before his arm was seized and an angry voice demanded:

"Why did you do that?"

The speaker was Dyer, the young foreman, and his voice was full of anger.

"To call the cops, of course," Steve returned, a flash of defiance in his small, dark eyes.

"What have the police to do with a case of this kind? Mr. Waldron committed suicide, and——"

Steve interrupted, in a tone of conviction:

"It ain't a suicide, George Dyer, and you know it."

"What do you mean?" Dyer retorted.

"It is a murder."

"Why do you think so?"

The lad pointed to the open window, and replied:

"'Cause that is never opened at this time of day, you know. Somebody shot Mr. Waldron, and then jumped out into the court. I can show where he struck."

Steve drew the young man toward the window. As he drew near the latter, he saw something upon the white sash that caused him to ejaculate:

"What do you think of that? Guess I know somethin', if I don't happen to be boss over a lot of type-stickers."

George Dyer, for the first time, exhibited intense excitement. He was rather apathetic by nature, and those who knew him were wont to remark that an earthquake wouldn't make him change color.

"You're right, Steve!" he exclaimed, in a low, husky tone. "It is a murder, and a bold one at that. It seems as though it would be easy to catch the culprit, though."

Quickly the tidings ran through the increasing throng which was gathering in the spacious counting-room, and many crowded close to the open window and stared shudderingly at the tell-tale sign which Steve's keen eyes had detected.

The sash was broad, smooth, and painted white. Near the middle, just where one would naturally take hold to raise the sash, was the bloody imprint of a man's thumb.

This was all; yet how significant, even to the inexperienced eyes of those who stared at it in morbid curiosity.

At this juncture several officers arrived upon the scene, and the crowd was forced to retire. Only Steve, Dyer, Mr. Blain, and two or three others, besides the policemen, were allowed to remain.

Steve noticed one slender, thin-featured man who entered behind the officers, and of whom the latter appeared to take not the least notice.

This man wore spectacles, and seemed to be very near-sighted. He also appeared to be quite deaf, for he frequently placed his hands to his ears as though trying to catch something which was being said.

"A reporter," was the lad's mental decision, after watching him curiously for several moments.

The absurdity of this inference struck him immediately, however, and he added, half aloud:

"The idea of a deaf and near-sighted reporter, when it is their business to see and hear everything. Ha! What is the chap up to now, I wonder?"

The odd-looking stranger had crossed over to the open window, and seemed to be closely inspecting the bloody thumb-print on the sash.

And the next moment Steve saw him do a most extraordinary thing.

With a tiny saw which he produced from a pocket, the man quickly made a slot in the sash on each side of the mark. Then, with a keen-bladed knife he deftly clipped off a small section of the sash, wrapped the piece in tissue paper, and then stood motionless as a statue, gazing out into the court.

All this was accomplished so quickly that, with the exception of Steve Lawton, not a soul in the room noticed the action. And before Steve had time to conjecture concerning the stranger's purpose, his attention was diverted by a most thrilling occurrence.

He heard the sounds of a scuffle behind the railing. Turning quickly, he was in time to see a man spring past the guard at one of the doors, followed by two others in swift pursuit.

The fugitive was George Dyer, the foreman; the pursuers were policemen.

At the same instant a shout was raised that electrified all who heard it.

"Stop him! Stop the miscreant!"

Half involuntarily, Steve sprang past the guard into the passage-way beyond—on, until he reached the stair-way leading to the basement.

The policemen had kept on past this stair-way, supposing the one of whom they were in pursuit to have made for the street door. But a significant sound from below caused Steve to dart down the stairs instead.

Reaching a small room below, which was dimly lighted, the lad paused to listen.

Why he was pursuing George Dyer he did not know. Why were the policemen chasing him? What had the young foreman done? Surely he could not be the——

Steve's hasty reflections were interrupted by a shadow falling athwart the floor. At the same instant he turned and met the gaze of George Dyer.

"Not a sound—on your life, be quiet!" the foreman huskily exclaimed, emphasizing his command by thrusting a revolver close to the startled youngster's face.

Steve knew better than to disobey an injunction like that. Yet he was not frightened, for there was an expression in the young man's eyes more likely to excite pity than fear.

"Why are the cops chasin' you?" Steve found voice to ask.

"Hush! I must hide, and you must not betray me, Steve. You will not betray me!" Dyer exclaimed, in low, earnest tones.

CHAPTER II.

THE DETECTIVE.

We will not mystify the reader with vague com plications. The occasion of George Dyer's sudden flight from the counting-room and the hot pursuit of the officers can be quickly explained, so far as it was understood by the pursuers themselves.

As yet no formal investigation had been held.

Along with the policemen a coroner's deputy had arrived, and as he was a physician, he had proceeded to examine the body of Mr. Waldron.

The latter lay upon the floor, and in one hand he grasped a revolver. One chamber of the latter was empty; and the fatal bullet had penetrated the victim's heart, causing instantaneous death.

So much was revealed at a glance, and so far it appeared like a suicide.

The physician's examination was quickly made, in the presence of Mr. Blain and two policemen, one of the latter being a sergeant from police headquarters.

In the meanwhile, the other circumstances of the case, which pointed strongly to the theory of murder, were freely discussed by those present, as was natural, and during this discussion George Dyer had appeared upon the scene.

The young man's face was rather pale, as was natural under the circumstances. As he stood gazing upon the lifeless form of his late employer, Mr. Blain lightly touched his arm, and said:

"I think you can give valuable evidence at the inquest, George."

There was no particular significance in the gentleman's tones. Mr. Blain was agitated, of course, and he had an abrupt way of saying things which was a trifle startling to a stranger.

The young foreman quickly glanced up, his pallor deepening, and in an indignant tone, he exclaimed:

"What do you mean, sir?"

The tone, rather than the words, caused all present to fix their gaze upon his face.

Mr. Blain hesitated an instant, and then, as though prompted by a sudden impulse, he said:

"It was you who said, 'Waldron has killed himself!' I heard the shout plainly, for I was coming up from the basement at the time the shot was fired. And it was your voice."

Mr. Blain did not, in the beginning, intend to make this accusation. Only at this moment had he been convinced that it was Dyer who had uttered the startling words.

It was only the young man's singular agitation that had given birth to the conviction.

Dyer was silent a moment. His eyes blazed with a strange expression. The coroner's deputy and the policemen continued to stare.

"Do you accuse me?" Dyer then demanded.

"Only of uttering the words I have repeated," was the reply.

"And if I did utter them?"

"Explain—that is all."

"I have nothing to say, sir."

The young man cast a swift, furtive glance toward the officers. Then he turned away hastily, seemingly, at least, with the intention of flight.

Mr. Blain and the deputy coroner made simultaneous signs to the policemen, which the latter failed to observe. Then the former himself sprang to intercept the foreman.

He caught the latter around the waist; there was a momentary struggle, then Dyer flung off the grasp of his employer and darted through the gate-way leading from the desk-room to the outer office.

One of the policemen bounded in pursuit, and thus occurred the scene which had so mystified Steve Lawton, the young apprentice.

Neither Mr. Blain, nor the coroner passed the guard at the entrance of the passage. They were confident the policeman would overtake the fugitive.

"What can the fellow mean? It cannot be that he is the guilty one! No, no!"

It was Mr. Blain who said this, and his tones expressed sudden anguish, for George Dyer was a trusted employee.

At that moment his glance rested for the first time on the slender spectacled man, whose mysterious maneuvers had excited the curiosity of Steve Lawton.

This individual had left the window, and was in the act of passing through the railing gate-way, beyond which lay the victim of the tragedy. Blain and the doctor followed. The latter said, in an undertone:

"That is Croly, the new detective. Rather cranky they call him, but he has worked up one or two extraordinary cases, it is said."

They saw the spectacled man examine the revolver which had been taken from the hand of the corpse. Then he inspected the fatal wound, scanned the floor, the ceiling, and the walls in turn.

Mr. Blain and the coroner's deputy furtively watched him.

"A detective quack—a pretender!" was the former's mental decision.

This verdict had scarcely crossed his mind, however, before he was impelled to change it.

"A quarrel; pistols drawn; other party fired first; Mr. Waldron the victim."

This was spoken by Croly, the detective, in a mild, low voice. He had abruptly ceased his investigations and addressed the remark to Mr. Blain.

"You think Mr. Waldron was killed in a quarrel?" Blain demanded, in his abrupt way.

"Evidently. He might have drawn his weapon for self-defense, but he certainly had no chance to use it."

"So you did not notice the empty chamber of the cylinder?"

"Oh, yes. Been empty a good while, too. Cartridge-shell removed; barrel not smoked; weapon hasn't been used since it was thoroughly cleaned and oiled. You did not hold to the suicide theory, Mr. Blain?"

The latter felt strangely thrilled as the spectacled eyes of the detective were fixed penetratingly upon his face.

"Certainly not, since the bloody thumb-mark was discovered on the window-sash."

"Still you thought this pistol was the one used?"

"I supposed the murderer placed the weapon in the hand of his victim before escaping."

"Not at all. He didn't stop for that. Mr. Waldron was shot by an enemy in a quarrel. You ought to be able to name the culprit, Mr. Blain. Who was Mr. Waldron's bitterest enemy, eh?"

"I did not know he had one in the world."

"You are his partner?"

"Yes, sir."

"And didn't know he had an enemy?"

"I did not."

"That is queer, I declare. How long have you been in business together?"

"For ten years."

"And I suppose you know each other rather intimately?"

"Of course. We were warm personal friends."

"Still you did not suspect that he had an enemy? Why, have you kept your eyes shut for ten years?"

"Business men may be friends and still not pry into each other's private affairs," said Mr. Blain, a trifle sharply.

Croly cast a peculiar glance toward the coroner's deputy, and said:

"I suppose, Mr. Blain, that you have no enemies?"

"I am not prepared to say, sir. I have intended to treat every one squarely, yet I may have unconsciously excited enmity."

The detectve stepped quietly forward, and tapped the rich man lightly upon the shoulder.

"Let us understand each other, Mr. Blain," he said, in his mild tones.

As we have before stated, Julian Blain was the senior partner of the firm. He was one of the "solid" business men in New York, and it would be hard to find one whose reputation for integrity stood higher than his.

He was wealthy and honored. He had held various public offices, and, unlike many, he had not betrayed the trust reposed in him.

He was called in all respects a "square" man.

Woe to the employee, foreman or apprentice, who should quibble or prevaricate in their dealings with Mr. Blain. And woe likewise to the one who should dispute or defy this gentleman upon his own premises. He was abrupt of speech and rather hasty in temper. The words and tones of this slender, spectacled detective irritated him, and he sharply retorted:

"Well, sir, what have you to say?"

The coroner's deputy bent eagerly forward. He felt that something startling was about to occur.

"Simply, Mr. Blain," Croly began, with studied deliberateness; "simply this, sir: you have stated to me an out and out falsehood."

The deputy scarce repressed a startled exclamation!

Mr. Blain recoiled, as though he had received a blow in the face.

"Dare you tell me that I have lied?" he fiercely demanded.

"About the same thing, sir," was the mild response.

"Do you mean it?"

"I mean it. It is a good plan for us to start with a good understanding with each other. We shall be better friends in the end."

Julian Blain, in his fierce anger, sprang toward the detective with clenched hands.

But the blow which he impetuously sent out was skillfully parried; and in another instant the rich man was whirled around by powerful arms and forcibly seated in a pivotal chair close at hand.

For a moment the gentleman panted helplessly from exhaustion and the excess of passion.

He did not attempt to rise. But he glared up at

the face of the detective, who seemed not the least excited by that which had taken place.

"You must restrain your temper, sir," Croly quietly remarked, while he waited for the other to regain his breath.

Mr. Blain's anger subsided as quickly as it had been aroused.

"If you thought I was deceiving you," he said, speaking quite calmly, "you should have stated your suspicions more courteously."

"Then you would have denied their truth. Now you will admit it. You know that Mr. Waldron had an enemy, and so have you. That enemy was a former business partner of yours, whom you 'crowded out' of the partnership because he was dissipated and seemed likely to disgrace you. The man's name is Carl Brandon, and he swore vengeance against you both. Am I not right?"

Mr. Blain rose slowly to his feet, the flush of anger upon his face having given place to a slight pallor.

"What you say is true," he declared; "though Heaven only knows how you became possessed of the information. I supposed the secret was dead and buried. At all events, it can have nothing to do with this tragedy. Carl Brandon was a reckless man, but he would never do this."

"I have not charged Brandon with the crime. But it is well to question every circumstance in the case, even to the graceful, closely vailed lady who called upon your partner early this morning. You saw this lady come and go, Mr. Blain. You do not think she could have instigated the murder?"

Mr. Blain's visage turned to the hue of ashes, his lips trembled, and he clutched the arms of his chair as though for support.

"Great Heaven, man! how knew you of her visit?" he hoarsely asked.

"I saw her as she entered and came forth—pretty fair evidence, you see," the detective replied. "I even know that Mr. Waldron's visitor was a certain pretty compositor in your printing-house. Her name and the object of her visit I shall ascertain in due time. As you now understand that I have a faculty of discovering all sorts of facts, you will see how useless your attempts to hide them from me must prove. But hush! Here come the officers who started out after that foreman of yours. And he has given them the slip."

CHAPTER III.

THE DETECTIVE'S STRANGE CLEW.

Croly, the detective, did not stay to hear the report of the policemen who had failed in their attempt to overtake George Dyer.

He hastened out upon the street, quickly walked to the elevated railway station at the Bowery and Canal street, took the first train, and, a little later, alighted at East Forty-seventh street. His private rooms were close by, and he went to them directly.

Opening from his chamber was a small room, little larger than a closet, the door of which he kept constantly locked.

The room had no window, and his first act upon entering was to light the gas. Then he closed the door and seated himself at a table.

The room was fitted up with shelves. These, as well as the table, were laden with an indescribable jumble of curiosities.

There were odd-shaped knives, murderous-looking dirks, pistols of all sizes and shapes, a fragment of a dynamite bomb, several burglars' tools, and various other implements taken from criminals or preserved as clews to unsolved mysteries.

On the table was an open scrap-book, in which were pasted portraits and sketches of numerous criminals, clipped from the newspapers. There were also several labeled vials containing liquids and powders. In a glass jar, floating in alcohol, was a severed finger—a clew to a crime recently solved by this wonderful detective.

Upon another table, over which a mirror hung, were materials for every conceivable disguise that one might wish to assume.

Croly took from his pocket the piece which he had cut from the window-sash in the printing-house counting-room. He unwrapped it carefully, and then studied the bloody thumb-print with eager intensity.

From a shelf he took down a tattered book, and opened it at a marked page. A single line on the printed page was underlined with blue ink. The line read as follows:

"The lines on no two human thumbs are exactly alike."

The detective had read this statement a great many times, but never with such vital interest as the present.

The book was an old, curious affair, containing many wonders of human research and science. It also contained some exploded sophistries, no longer of value.

Whether the curious statement underlined by the detective was true or not, Croly was uncertain.

He had carefully studied the subject, vaguely impressed that at some time it would prove of value to him. What if the print of a human thumb, and the lines upon the same, should at some time prove to be the only clew to a great crime?

Often had this thought passed through the detective's mind; and like a sagacious prophecy, it now seemed likely to be fulfilled.

A crime had been committed—a crime enshrouded in deepest mystery, and the only clew, save those of a most superficial character, was this bloody impression on the window-sash.

The impression was wonderfully perfect, every line being distinctly traced. It seemed as though Fate had placed this piece of evidence in the hands of the great scientific detective, that the truth or fallacy of the curious statement might be proven.

Croly placed this strange clew carefully under a glass globe, to protect it from dust and accident. Then he closed the book, and said, aloud:

"Most detectives would consider such a clew as this a rather slender one. I guess it is. But somehow, I am impressed by a conviction that the wretch who shot Hiram Waldron left behind a fatal imprint, and that I shall soon have him under my thumb."

The detective went out, carefully closing and locking the door.

Later in the day he attended the inquest in the coroner's office, in East Houston street. He was called upon to testify as an expert.

The verdict implicated no one, but declared the case to be one of murder, not of suicide.

After the inquest Croly returned to the printing-house. Of course, business in the building was suspended, but a number of employees and others lingered about the premises under the impulse of morbid curiosity.

Croly found Mr. Blain in a small private office. That gentleman had just concluded a consultation with a detective sergeant from police headquarters.

"I am glad to see you, Mr. Croly," the gentleman promptly said, placing a chair for his visitor.

"I was afraid you would not be," was the quick reply.

Croly seated himself in a position whence he could

furtively watch the expressions of the other through his spectacles.

"Why not, sir?" Mr. Blain demanded.

"On account of our encounter of this morning."

"You were discourteous, and I was hasty."

"I was outspoken, that is all. I gave you a fair chance to tell me the truth, but you persisted in an out and out falsehood."

The detective's tones were mild, but his words were blunt.

No one ever dared before to use such language to Julian Blain.

"You tried to entrap me," the latter declared, an angry tremor in his tones.

"I tried your veracity, and found it wanting, sir."

"Did you come here to insult me?"

"I came to have a plain talk. You will gain nothing by flying into a passion."

"I claim the right of resenting insult."

"Of course you do when you are insulted. But since you have admitted your fault, I fail to see where the offense on my part comes in."

"Never mind, let it pass. What do you wish to know?"

"In the first place, do you wish this mystery to be solved?"

"By all means."

"Are you willing I should take the case?"

"You are privileged to do so, but I shall not undertake to keep other detectives from working on it."

"Of course not."

Croly bent slightly forward and rapped the table which was between them with his forefinger.

"Mr. Blain, where were you when the fatal shot was fired?" he asked.

"I was on the street."

"How far from the building?"

"Only a few yards. I was on the point of entering."

"You heard the pistol-shot?"

"Distinctly."

"And the shout which several have stated that they heard immediately afterward?"

"Yes."

"What did you do then?"

"I ran to the counting-room entrance, and found it locked."

"Locked, eh! And then what?'

"I went around to another door and entered."

"You came directly to the scene of the tragedy?"

"I did."

"Whom did you first encounter?"

"George Dyer, in the passage with several others. Next was Steve Lawton, one of my apprentices, who was first to discover the crime."

"Where is this youngster, who, I understand, was first to find the victim, first to sound an alarm, first to summon officers?"

"He has disappeared—probably run off to escape testifying at the inquest."

"Probably he has done nothing of the kind. Has search been made for him?"

"We sent to his lodgings and made inquiries."

"And that is all?"

"That is all."

"How about George Dyer?"

"That is what puzzles me. He cannot be found, although this building has been searched from top to bottom, and the police all over the city are on the lookout for him."

"Then you think he knows something about the crime?"

"I am convinced that he does. I am positive that it was he who uttered the cry, 'Waldron has killed himself,' which was heard directly after the shot."

"He would not utter such a cry without a motive?"

"That is what looks dark for him."

"Do you think he killed Mr. Waldron?"

"Under other circumstances I should as soon think of suspecting the Governor of the State."

"What is Dyer's character?"

"Excellent. He is temperate, a good compositor, faithful in all respects. He has a weakness for bullying the boy apprentices—and that is the only thing I have ever seen in him to dislike."

"Was he on good terms with Mr. Waldron?"

"I have no reason to think otherwise."

"When you first encountered him in the passage, did he appear agitated?"

"He was calmer than the others."

"In case he committed the crime, could he have jumped out through the open window in the counting room, and afterward have made his way unobserved to the passage where you found him?"

"He could not."

"Why not?"

"Because I was near enough to have seen him."

"Then he certainly did not commit the crime."

"How are you so positive?"

"Because the murderer escaped by the window."

"Perhaps he raised the sash as a 'blind,' and then ran into the passage where I saw him."

"No, he did not. Some one leaped through the open window. The marks where the man struck underneath the window were very plain. That isn't

all. There was a window open in the building upon the other side of the court, and evidently the fugitive escaped from the court in that direction."

Mr. Blain sprang to his feet in his eagerness.

"Then that building must be searched and guarded. The wretch may be hiding there at this moment."

He would have rung an alarm had his hand not been arrested by the detective, who calmly said:

"Wait—it is all right. I caused the place to be searched, very quietly, while the coroner was making his investigations here. And the place is now guarded. But nothing was found."

Mr. Blain gazed at the detective with an expression of admiration.

"You keep your wits about you, I declare, Mr. Croly!"

"I always find them handy in my business," the other dryly replied.

Croly rose and added:

"Have I your consent to search this building on my own account?"

"You have, and to come and go at pleasure. A noble, Christian gentleman has been foully dealt with—a man whom I loved as a brother—and I wish no stone to remain unturned in the quest of the murderer!"

Mr. Blain's tones softened with emotion, and he earnestly added:

"I shall depend upon you to solve this mystery, Mr. Croly."

At that moment both were startled by the sound of rapid footsteps outside the door, followed by the cry:

"If yer lay a hand on me I—I'll strike!"

CHAPTER IV.

STEVE'S THRILLING EXPERIENCE.

Steve Lawton, face to face with Dyer, the foreman, was strangely impressed by the speech of the latter.

"Why did you run from the cops?" the boy reiterated.

"Because I did not wish them to take me," was the weak reply.

"That's a slim reason, I call it. Why shouldn't I run from 'em? Why shouldn't everybody in the city take to their legs when they see a couple of cops comin' along—hey? I guess you've done something, George Dyer!"

The grasp upon the boy's arm tightened, and a menacing glance shot from the young man's eyes.

"If you dare to betray me it will go hard with you," he hissed.

"I don't see how I can betray yer when I don't know as you've done anything."

The footsteps of the pursuing officers grew louder over their heads. The sounds increased the anxiety of the foreman, who said:

"Steve, you must help me to escape."

"Me—help you?"

"Yes. You must throw my pursuers off my track."

"Why should I do that?"

"Because I have done nothing deserving of the punishment which I am sure to receive if I am taken."

"Then what are you hidin' for?"

"Because there is evidence against me. Quick—will you aid me or not?"

"I ain't goin' to do nothin' in the dark. I ain't so fresh as all that."

The boy half regretted his words the instant they were uttered, for Dyer glared upon him with such intense ferocity that he half feared he would use the weapon.

In that moment a horrible fear flashed upon the young apprentice.

What if George Dyer were, in truth, the murderer? If he were capable of such a heartless crime, would he hesitate to strike down a boy who stood in the way of escape?

Steve shivered with sudden dread. But he did not try to escape. He only stared at his captor, and waited to see what the latter would do next.

Dyer did not have the reputation of possessing a great stock of courage. Nor was he, ordinarily, a passionate fellow. Hence it seemed absurd to Steve to even suspect him of so bold a crime.

Nearer drew the pursuing footsteps.

George Dyer suddenly flung one hand over the boy's mouth, and quickly lifted him in his arms.

The young man was possessed of more than ordinary muscular power, and Steve was utterly helpless in his arms.

The foreman darted through an open doorway, and deftly closed and locked the door.

They were now in the great, silent press-room. Several lights glimmered faintly, and the large cylinder presses looked like silent monsters, petrified in the midst of their labors.

Motionless pulleys and shafting; motionless belts,

looking faint and shadowy in the dim light. Great stacks of printed and unprinted papers on every side.

On, past these objects, ran George Dyer, with the apprentice hugged close in his arms. Steve might have uttered a shout for help, but prudence forbade his doing so. He realized that his captor's mind was in a condition of desperation, and that it was unsafe to goad him too far.

Reaching the end of the main press-room, Dyer passed through another open door-way, and thus entered the engine-room.

Here could be heard a faint hissing of steam from a loose valve.

The monster engine, like the other machines, was silent and motionless, as though all were paralyzed with the horror of the dreadful crime which had been enacted above.

Beyond this was another apartment, the last in that end of the building. Here were boilers where the power for running the presses was generated. Here the hiss of steam was more pronounced.

On the threshold of this room the fugitive halted, and cast a penetrating glance forward. He half expected to see a fireman sitting in the broken chair opposite the boilers.

But the chair was vacant. No figure started up to dispute his flight.

Here Dyer set Steve upon his feet, and closed the door between the boiler and engine-rooms with his left hand, while he clung to the boy with the other.

This was a massive iron door for protection against fire. But it was provided with no lock or bolt.

But the foreman was not long in finding means for fastening the door. Upon the floor he found a piece of steam pipe, and he thrust this through the

handle of the door, wedging it in place with a block of wood.

Now he was satisfied that no ordinary effort from the other side could succeed in forcing admittance to the boiler-room.

Once more he confronted Steve with the low exclamation:

"Now let them take me if they can!"

The lad still maintained his coolness, although he realized that he was in danger.

"Do you expect to keep them out that way?" the lad questioned.

"I can, for a time."

"And then what?"

"Then they won't find me here."

"What are you goin' to do with me?"

"That depends."

"Depends on what?"

"Whether you promise not to tell how I escaped."

"Got a secret way to git out of here, have you?"

"I have a way, yes."

Steve glanced swiftly around the room. But it was only dimly lighted, and he could detect no spot by which it was possible for a man to escape from the room save by the door.

"Do you promise?" Dyer repeated.

"Supposin' I do?"

"I will leave you here, and when the officers break in you will be free."

"What shall I say to them?"

"Make up any kind of a story you please."

"Make up a lie, and help to hide a murderer, eh!"

The young man clutched the boy's arm more tightly again, and hoarsely said:

"You wrong me. I have committed no crime. It was not I who shot Hiram Waldron."

"Do you mean it?"

"It is true, Steve. I am innocent."

The boy was silent a moment, his brain intensely active. He suddenly exclaimed:

"Are you truly innocent, George Dyer?"

"As innocent as you are."

"Then I know what the racket is. I know why yer are so 'feared of being caught."

"Why?"

" 'Cause yer knows who fired the shot. I guess you seen it done. That's why."

"I admit it, Steve; I witnessed the crime," said the young man, in a low, trembling voice.

There was a moment of intense silence, and then he added:

"I should not have admitted this even to you, had you not already guessed the truth. Will you promise, now, not to betray me?"

"That would be helpin' to shield the murderer from justice," Steve declared, shaking his head.

"You will do so much for me!"

"No, I won't, and don't you forget it."

"Is your decision final?"

"Yer can wait a week, if yer think I'll change my mind. I ain't in no partickler hurry."

These words had scarcely passed the boy's lips when he was suddenly lifted in the arms of his captor, and borne swiftly across the room.

"Help—help!" shouted the lad, assailed by a desperate fear.

But the thick walls sent back his cry with a dead sound, and he knew that it could have reached the ears of no one outside.

George Dyer stooped and grasped an iron ring which was fastened to a small, square section of floor.

He raised the section, disclosing a black, yawning opening.

Steve struggled desperately to escape from the powerful arms of his captor.

But in vain. And again he shouted for help, with the same hopeless result as before.

Then, despite his resistance, despite his cry for mercy, the boy was thrust downward through the opening—down into the black abyss below.

For an instant Dyer clung to the lad's collar, allowing him to hang in suspension. Then he released his hold, and the youngster was sensible of the awful horror of dropping down, down through invisible space.

He struck with a shock, and then his senses forsook him, partly from terror and partly from the violent contact of his head with the hard earth upon which he had fallen.

Nearly an hour passed before he had fully regained his senses; and it required another hour to clamber up the wet, slippery wall that helped to support that end of the building.

Several times he made the attempt, only to fall back again, and add to the bruises from which he already suffered.

And when he had at last succeeded in drawing himself up through the opening into the boiler-room, he was so exhausted that he sank down upon the floor and lay there a long time, faint, weak, and breathless.

At length he recovered and sprang to his feet.

For a short space he had slept, overcome by exhaustion, and the sleep refreshed him wonderfully.

Then he glanced about him in sudden terror, lest Dyer should reappear and again consign him to the dark space below.

But the young foreman was not there. At the same time he discovered that the door of the boiler-room was open, while the piece of steam-pipe with which it had been fastened lay upon the floor.

Steve seized this, feeling that with it he could make a desperate defense, if necessary. Then he made his way back through the engine and press-rooms, past the silent monsters whose clangor of life was accustomed to shake the massive building from top to bottom.

As the boy made his way toward the stairs he imagined that he saw a dark figure skulking in his rear.

This caused him to quicken his footsteps. A backward glance showed him that the skulking figure likewise moved more quickly.

There was no longer any doubt. The boy realized that he was pursued, and, his nerves weakened by the severe strain to which they had been subjected, he bounded swiftly up the stairs—swiftly along the passage toward the counting-room.

And after him glided the shadowy pursuer.

CHAPTER V.

STEVE AND THE DETECTIVE.

As Steve Lawton neared the door of the counting-room his foot struck an obstacle upon the floor, and he fell headlong.

He was on his feet in an instant, however, and confronting his pursuer.

The latter sprang toward him with outstretched hands, but he came suddenly to a halt as the youngster threateningly brandished the piece of iron pipe and exclaimed:

"If yer lay a hand on me I—I'll strike!"

The man, who was one of the policemen set to watch for Dyer, ejaculated:

"Hi! it's the boy!"

"Hope yer didn't take me for a girl. Suthin' must ail your eyes if ye did," Steve retorted.

"We were looking for you as well as the other chap," said the policeman, making a feint of seizing the lad's arm.

"Don't you try that, I tell you. I won't be pulled, 'cause I haven't done nothin'. Hands off, I say."

And the piece of steam-pipe cut the air with a warning whiz.

The policeman recoiled, somewhat impressed by the youngster's belligerence.

"Don't you know any better than to strike an officer?" he fiercely demanded.

"I ain't goin' to be arrested, that's all."

"Tell me where Dyer has gone."

"I don't know."

"Mighty innocent, aren't you, my boy? Perhaps we can find a way to make you own up."

"Jest try it, if yer think so. If ye can make me tell anything I don't know, go ahead. But you'll have a funny time of it, I can tell ye that."

The policeman was not angered by the boy's defiance. In truth, he rather admired Steve for his grit. At the same time he was convinced that the boy had been with Dyer, and that he knew the hiding-place of the latter.

Of course, a policeman could not think of giving up to a youngster like this one. And he now concluded that he had dallied with the boy long enough. So, with increased brusqueness of tone, the officer said:

"Come, come—no more fooling! Put down that pipe."

"Won't do it!" was the terse retort, as Steve grasped his weapon the more tightly.

"Drop it!" in a fiercer tone.

"Nary!"

The officer sprang upon the boy as though he would tear him to pieces.

Down came the piece of steam-pipe with a resounding thwack on the policeman's shoulder.

But the man was so much taller than his young adversary that the weapon did not strike him squarely, and much of the blow's force was broken.

Still the officer was maddened by the blow, and exercising all his strength and agility he succeeded in seizing the weapon and wrenching it from the lad's grasp.

Then he grasped the boy by the throat and forced

him back against the wall, holding him thus until he was black in the face.

At this juncture the policeman was treated to a startling surprise.

A pair of powerful hands seized him from behind, lifted him clear off the floor, whirled him aloft with dizzy swiftness, and then sent him reeling toward the other end of the passage.

The astonished policeman recovered his feet and glanced about him in a dazed fashion.

He saw Steve Lawton standing at a little distance; and near the boy was a slender, thin-faced man regarding both through his spectacles.

In the door-way stood Mr. Blain.

"Who—who did that?" the policeman demanded, as soon as he could recover his speech.

"Perhaps I did," the thin man replied, in a mild tone.

"You! Well, I guess not."

"Why not I?"

"I could spin two men like you as I would a couple of tops."

"Do you think so?"

"I am pretty sure of it."

"Well, you may try spinning me, if you really think you can do it. But I would advise you to insure yourself against accidents before you begin. There is always more or less risk in experiments of that kind."

The policeman advanced, bending a penetrating look upon the thin, mild-voiced man. The passage was rather dimly lighted; but as he drew nearer he suddenly remembered that he had seen this same spectacled man before that day. He recalled, at

the same time, that a brother officer had said, in answer to a query of his:

"That thin chap? He is the new detective that has been waking snakes around here lately. Croly they call him. Strongest man in New York, so they say. A regular lion in weasel's skin."

The policeman abruptly paused, and in a tone of respect exclaimed:

"I—I guess I did make a mistake, sir. That is, if you are Croly, the detective?"

"I am Croly, the detective," was the mild response. "You had no right to be so rough with the boy, and I thought it would be well to practically show you the effect of harsh usage. Did you like it?"

"The lad struck me, and refused to submit to authority."

"I saw nearly the whole affair, so you need not explain. The boy is plucky and wide awake. You tried to bulldoze him when you had no right to do so. He knew his rights, and stood up for them. That is the case in a nutshell. If you are not satisfied report the case at headquarters, and I will appear in behalf of the boy."

"Let it go, sir—let it go," the policeman hastily said, adding: "But I found him skulking in the basement, and I fancy he can tell us what has become of the missing foreman if he tries."

The policeman turned away, leaving Steve alone with Mr. Blain and the detective.

The latter advanced and laid one hand upon the boy's shoulder, saying, kindly:

"You look as though you had seen rough handling, my lad."

Steve looked alertly into the face of the detective.

Only a few months since he had been picked up

from the street by Mr. Waldron, who was a benevolent man, and fond of giving struggling and oppressed ability a chance in the world.

Steve had knocked about the streets all his life. He had been kicked and cuffed until he developed a resolution to stand up for his rights. He had been cheated and abused by men of whom better conduct was expected. Hence he became suspicious of everybody, and especially so of those who assumed a pleasant tone in addressing him.

Therefore it was not strange that he received the kindly remark of the detective with a feeling that the latter merely meant, in some way, to get the best of him.

"I guess I ain't hurt very bad, mister," he said, with a shrug of indifference.

"So you would have liked it as well if I had left you to fight it out alone?" Croly asked.

"I would have come out of the racket somehow. I generally fights my own battles."

"Don't be offish, my boy. I am told that Mr. Waldron, who has been so foully murdered, was your patron."

"What's a patron, mister? I ain't a college perfessor, to talk such high-toned lingo."

"Mr. Waldron was a friend to you—took you from the streets and made you an apprentice in his printing-house, did he not?"

"He did, mister. And he paid my board out'n his own pocket, he did. He was square, an' don't you forget it."

The tremor of the boy's tones showed how deep was his feeling upon this point.

"And of course you keenly feel the loss of this noble friend of yours," Croly continued.

"You bet I do. And if I knew who killed him, I'd get a bowie knife and a revolver and I'd be revenged. I wish I could do suthin'. I wish I was a fly-cop!"

Croly placed both hands on the boy's shoulders, and bent eagerly toward him.

Steve could feel the wonderful power of the man's gaze upon him. And, strangely enough, his boyish heart warmed with a sensation of confidence and liking for the detective.

"You can do something, my boy," Croly declared, speaking in low, earnest accents. "You can help me to find the miscreant who murdered your noble friend. You can turn detective, my lad—as my assistant!"

"Can I? D'ye mean it, mister?"

"Hush, not so loud. Detectives have to learn, as their first lesson, the art of keeping still. You must obey my instructions, and for the present do nothing except what I may direct."

"Well, what is the first thing I may do?"

"Tell me where you have been since morning."

The boy glanced toward the door, where Mr. Blain was standing, and in a low voice he said:

"I'm willin' to tell you anything you want to know, but I'd rather not say anything before others. You can tell 'em all yer please."

Croly spoke to Mr. Blain in a low tone; that gentleman nodded, and the detective and boy were shown into a small private office.

"Now tell us your story," said the detective, facing the lad.

Steve complied, omitting not a single detail.

Whether Croly considered the matter important

or otherwise his face did not indicate. Without comment he abruptly said:

"Now I wish you tell me all you know concerning a certain pretty compositor employed in this establishment. They call her Stella, I believe."

Before Steve could reply, both were thrilled by the cry, in a shrill, female voice:

"Release me, sir. Help! help!"

CHAPTER VI.

A GIRL'S RESOLUTION.

"That's her — Stella — now," Steve exclaimed, springing excitedly to his feet.

He leaped to the door, but Croly was there before him, with his hand upon the knob.

"Wait—softly," the detective warned.

He noiselessly opened the door, and stole silently across the threshold, followed by Steve.

Half way down the passage they saw two figures struggling. One was a tall, slender young man, whose face would have been handsome but for its flush of dissipation, and that indescribable expression which plainly tells the story of a reckless career.

The girl was slender and graceful as a gazelle. Her face was of exquisite beauty and dazzling complexion. Just then it was flushed with anger, and her dark eyes flashed with defiance.

The young man was clinging to her slender wrist, which she was struggling to free from his grasp.

"You—you never looked so pretty in all your life, Stella, 'pon my word," the young man drawled as Croly and his companion stepped into the passage.

"Let me go, sir," she cried, half in pleading, half in command.

"You needn't be so dused crusty with a fellow, my girl. I like you ever so much, 'pon my word. I—I'm honest, now. Been watching my chance to tell you so for an age, but you were so shy that I couldn't

get a chance, except when all the other girls were 'round. What makes you so shy of me, Stella? Haven't I always treated you well?"

The young man was sadly under the influence of liquor—so much was evident at a glance.

Yet he seemed to be deeply in earnest. Although he firmly clung to the girl's wrist, he otherwise addressed himself as respectfully as his condition would permit.

"You know why I avoid you, Clarence Blain," she replied.

She had ceased struggling, and stood flushed and breathless before him.

"You think I ain't in earnest, I s'pose," he questioned, in his drawling tones.

"You are an idle, dissipated fellow, and no decent girl could respect you," was the sharp retort.

"That so? I declare, Stella, you don't pick your words, do you? But never mind—I like you better for being blunt. Drink more'n is good for me, I admit. But you could reform me if you'd try. You're pretty and good, and bright as a button, Stella. I'd make you my wife in a minute if you'd only consent, and I'd dress you better'n any woman in New York —I would, by Jupiter!"

Again the girl attempted to release her arm, but in vain.

Then, quick as a flash, she struck her persecutor a stinging blow upon his cheek with her free hand.

He recoiled with an ejaculation of pain, at the same time involuntarily releasing his grasp upon her wrist. Before he could recover it she darted away from him, fleeing along the passage.

But her liberty was of brief duration. She at-

tempted to open a door to continue her flight, but found it locked.

The delay allowed the young man to overtake her, and this time he was too angry to restrain the fierceness of his clutch.

He caught her roughly by the shoulder and drew her rudely backward.

But scarcely had he done so when he recoiled in dismay.

For the desperate girl had drawn a revolver, and thrust the muzzle close to the face of her persecutor.

"Will you release me now, sir?" she cried.

Although her voice trembled with anger, yet the irrepressible sweetness of its tones could not be wholly disguised.

Clarence Blain recoiled, freeing the girl's arm. He was partially sobered by her unexpected menace.

"You carry a pistol, Stella?" he gasped, staring at her with distended eyes.

"You see I am not defenseless," she returned.

"But you wouldn't shoot me, I know? Such a pretty,sweet girl as you are would never shed blood!"

"Gentle, am I?"

The girl's voice had a strange sound as she said this, and she laughed in an odd, mirthless fashion.

"Perhaps I should be if I but had the chance," she continued, with sudden bitterness. "I have had to fight against a merciless destiny ever since I can remember, and that isn't the sort of training your sweet-tempered girls receive. If I have no one to defend me, I must defend myself. That is why I carry a pistol, and I know how to use it if need be."

The young man listened to her words in mute wonder.

He was charmed by the play of her sweet lips; by

the dainty color that came and went in her cheeks; by the resolute glances of her dusky eyes.

You're a stunning fine girl, anyhow!" the young man exclaimed, involuntarily.

"I do not like your compliments, Mr. Blain, and I wish you to go away and leave me."

"But I'm really your friend, Stella. I won't say such things if you don't fancy them, but I'm bound to stand by you anyhow, and if anybody tries to abuse you I—I'll settle with him. Mind that, Stella —I'll stick by you!"

This was plainly spoken under a good impulse prompted by genuine admiration.

The words had scarcely passed his lips, however, when he felt a hand clutch his collar from behind, and he was pushed at a rapid pace along the passage.

He tried to turn his head to see his assailant; but in vain. He only obtained a glimpse of a figure not so tall as himself.

He uttered a flood of threats and profanity. He kicked and squirmed with desperate fury.

But, struggle as he might, he was pushed forward so rapidly that he could scarcely keep on his feet. Nor did the one who was handling him so much as deign a verbal response to his ejaculations.

He saw Steve Lawton run ahead and open a door.

The next moment he was thrust forcibly across the threshold, the door was closed and locked behind him, and he realized that he must postpone the attempt at reconciliation with Stella to a more favorable occasion.

No one witnessed this maneuver with greater astonishment than did the girl.

In another moment she was confronted by Croly,

the detective, who regarded her through his spectacles with quiet interest.

He did not seem in the least out of breath from his exertion.

"I thought I would save you the trouble of shooting the wretch," Croly coolly declared. And he added, in a tone of friendly interest: "That fellow has annoyed you before, has he not?"

"A great many times," she replied.

"Is he the son of Mr. Blain?"

"Yes, sir."

"Does the father uphold the son in persecuting his lady compositors in this fashion?"

"He minds nothing about it. Clarence Blain has always done as he pleased about everything."

"Not always, I think. Just now, for instance!" and Croly smiled.

"You must be very strong, sir," the girl returned, regarding the stranger curiously.

"And you are very resolute, miss," he said, in reply.

"I stand up for my rights, that is all."

"You are an orphan, I take it?"

"I have no one to defend or look out for me."

"I didn't ask you if you had friends. I asked if you were an orphan."

Stella eyed him with sudden suspicion.

"You are a stranger, sir," she retorted.

"Have you any objections to telling me if your parents are living?" Croly persisted.

"I suppose I am not obliged to answer the questions of a curious stranger."

"I see you do not wish to tell me. Never mind—I can find out. What is your name, please?"

"Stella Gale."

"How long have you worked in this printing office?"

"Nearly four years."

"You were young when you began, then?"

"I was fifteen."

"You called upon Mr. Waldron in the counting-room quite early this morning, did you not?"

The girl's face grew deathly pale, and she recoiled.

"Who said I did?" she demanded.

"I saw you. You seemed to wish to conceal your identity, but you failed to disguise your walk. So, when you came back to work I noticed you. We detectives have to notice some fine points, you see?"

"Are you a detective, sir?"

"I am at work on the mystery enshrouding the murder of Mr. Waldron. So you must give me all the light you can on the subject."

"I know nothing about it, sir."

"Did he appear as usual when you were with him?"

"I haven't admitted that I was the vailed lady whom you saw."

"And I haven't said the lady was vailed. I said you were disguised. Caught, my girl—but don't be alarmed. Just tell us all about it."

Stella trembled violently. She was a keen-witted, fearless girl. But somehow this spectacled man made her feel strangely defenseless. It seemed as though he knew whether she were telling all or only a part of the truth every time she spoke.

"I went to see him upon private business," she said, her glance falling before the fixed gaze of the detective.

"Concerning yourself?"

"No, sir—about a friend."

"You have a friend, then?"

"Why do you thus closely question me? Must I tell all my secrets to an utter stranger?"

"I am seeking evidence concerning the crime, and it appears you were the last person to see the victim before the murder took place."

"Still, I know nothing about it, sir. I was at my case setting type when the shot was fired, and you may be sure, sir, I was terribly shocked."

"Of course you were. By the way, did you have that pistol with you when you held the interview with Mr. Waldron?"

The girl still held the weapon in her hand. She now thrust it hastily from sight.

"I did not," she replied.

"May I look at it?" Croly asked.

"For what purpose?"

The detective's voice did not change in its expression in the least as he answered:

"Because I fancy it is the weapon used by Mr. Waldron's murderer!"

CHAPTER VII.

A THRILLING ENCOUNTER.

It was no wonder that Stella was startled by the remark of the detective.

He spoke very quietly, yet with a positiveness of tone that seemed like a menace.

"You are mistaken, sir. It is impossible!" she gasped, her face growing deathly pale.

"If I am mistaken it can be easily proved, if you are frank in the matter," was the quiet response.

Steve Lawton until this moment had been standing by without taking any part in the interview; but now he impetuously exclaimed:

"She don't know nothin' 'bout the murder, mister —I'll stake my head on that."

"I can manage this part of the case, my boy; so don't worry, and don't jump at conclusions. The truth is a prize that cannot be won at a jump."

Croly turned to the trembling girl, and continued:

"Will you let me examine the weapon?"

"Will you return it to me?"

"Certainly."

She reluctantly relinquished the weapon, which was an old one, of somewhat unusual pattern. It was a five-shot revolver, and there was a cartridge in each chamber of the cylinder.

This fact would have baffled many detectives; but Croly quietly removed the cylinder, and placed his finger upon a carriage that appeared much brighter than the others.

"One shot has been fired to-day; that cartridge

fills its place. Barrel of pistol is smoked, and—— Look at this!"

He produced from his vest pocket a bullet, and deftly pressed it in at the muzzle of the weapon.

"Fits—doesn't it? And an odd size at that. This is the missile that took the life of Hiram Waldron this morning; and without doubt it was shot from this weapon!"

"By Jinkins!" ejaculated Steve.

Stella stared at the detective in dumb amazement. She took the weapon mechanically as he returned it to her.

"If you wish to keep such a weapon as that—an implement of foul murder—you may do so," Croly declared, as he gave up the revolver.

Instantly she returned it, exclaiming:

"No, no; I do not want it. Oh, what shall I do?"

"Tell me how you came by the pistol," was the prompt reply.

"It was given me long ago."

"It is yours, then?"

"Yes, sir."

"You did not have it with you when you went to see Mr. Waldron this morning?"

"No, sir."

"Where was it, then?"

"At my boarding place."

"Where is that?"

"At No. — East Fifteenth street."

"And you found it in its usual place when you returned?"

"Yes, sir."

"That will do, so far as the weapon is concerned. But I must know something more about you. You say your name is Stella Gale?"

"Yes, sir."

"Is your father living?"

"I believe he is."

"Where?"

"I do not know just where he is."

"In this city?"

"I think so."

"If your name is Gale, I suppose his is the same?"

Stella again felt that those spectacled eyes were reading her very thoughts."

"What has my father's name to do with this crime?" she asked, in a breathless way.

"Nothing, only I suspect that you are deceiving me a little, or trying to. Your father is a vagabond, isn't he?"

A painful flush dyed the girl's face and neck.

"Yes, he is a vagabond," she faintly admitted.

"And he has been arrested several times for drunkenness and petty theft?"

"Yes."

"And upon these occasions he gave his name as Brandon—Carl Brandon. Am I not right?"

"You know everything, sir. But he told me to take the name of Gale—my mother's name—to shield me from the disgrace that his would bring upon me. He didn't wish me to be an object of scorn to those with whom I am obliged to associate. And now you have exposed me. Are you merciless, sir? Have detectives no regard for human suffering?"

"Wait, my poor girl," Croly kindly said. "I have not exposed you to the scorn of your friends, and do not intend to. Steve, here, will keep your secret. But you see it is important that I should know all these things, because Carl Brandon was a former partner of Blain & Waldron, and was, I am in-

formed, a bitter enemy of both these gentlemen."

"He did not kill Mr. Waldron, sir. I would stake my life on his innocence," cried Stella, in accents of dismay.

Instinctively she realized that this quiet, spectacled detective was weaving a subtle web of evidence against her vagabond father.

"I have no reasons for suspecting your father," was the ready reply. "But I must follow all these little clews, and not drop them till they prove to be misleading. Now, tell me when you saw your father last?"

"More than a week ago."

"Where?"

"I met him on the street."

"That will do for the present, Miss Stella. And in future, should you need me to defend you against Clarence Blain or any other persecutor, I shall be at your service. In the meanwhile do not hide anything from me. I wish to prove you perfectly frank and truthful."

The detective turned to Steve, and said:

"Come, it is approaching nightfall, and I have a great deal to do."

They returned to the private office, where Croly gave the boy some specific directions.

When Steve was alone he slapped his knees in the intensity of his satisfaction.

"Detective business knocks type-stickin' higher'n a kite, by Jinkins it does!" he exclaimed.

Some hours afterward, it being quite late in the evening, Croly, the detective, emerged from his lodgings so completely disguised that no one would have recognized him.

He was attired as a dandy, with a mustache ex-

quisitely waxed, a silk hat, cane, and lavender-hued gloves.

He wore eye-glasses instead of spectacles. For, whatever his guise, Croly always took care to wear glasses of some kind, to conceal the real expression of his eyes. It matters not how skillfully one may be disguised, the eyes will invariably betray the person to any keen observer. But if no one ever looks into the eyes, and therefore never beholds their true expression, how can this feature betray the one disguised?

The detective, in his dandy make-up, entered a car of an elevated train going down town. As it chanced several passengers got out, while none except Croly got into this particular car.

Therefore, as the detective was about to take a seat, and the train rumbled on its way, he noticed that the car contained only a single occupant besides himself.

This passenger sat upon one of the four cross-seats in the middle of the car. He was a rather large man, wore a slouch hat and coarse garments, and his attitude was one either of dejection or profound reverie.

Croly made his way to the seat facing the one occupied by this stranger, and seated himself directly opposite the latter.

The man instantly raised his head, and bent a glance of surly displeasure upon the dandified person before him.

He had a coarse face, and small, bleary eyes. There was a scar across his left cheek; his beard was black and bristly; his hair long and unkempt.

For a full minute the two gazed fixedly at each

other. Then the rough stranger uttered a bull-dog growl.

"Pretty fine, ain't ye!" he exclaimed.

"Rather fine, to be sure. But we average all right, don't we?" Croly returned, purposely assuming an effeminate tone.

"What yer mean by that—hey?" with another bull-dog growl.

"I mean that you will never be hung for civility, sir."

The ruffian half rose to his feet, clenching his big, hairy hands.

"Yer mean it?" he demanded.

"I mean it."

"D'ye know who I am?"

"I haven't the least idea."

"I'm Bill Leary."

"Quite a name, to be sure."

"And I don't take sass from any dude with eye-glasses, I don't."

"What do you do in such a case?"

"I chokes their wind off!"

Croly betrayed not the least trace of alarm or other emotion. He tipped his head backward a little and significantly drew his fingers across the locality where the windpipe is supposed to exist.

Then he said:

"I don't believe you could do that thing to me."

"Don't ye, eh?"

"I really do not."

"'Cause why?"

"I shouldn't let you. That is why."

Croly's boldness astounded the burly ruffian, who had evidently been drinking just enough to make him quarrelsome.

"Ho, ho!—wouldn't let me!" he cried, in his harsh tones.

"I never fancied the thought of dying in that way," Croly declared, seemingly insensible of the belligerent attitude of the ruffian.

"Guess yer want me to eat ye alive, don't ye?"

"I shall not let you do that, either."

The ruffian pounced fiercely upon the slender, defiant individual before him.

But his outstretched hands came in contact with the seat only, for the detective, with amazing agility, had leaped aside, and before the stranger could turn upon his dandified foe, the latter had delivered a quick, terrible blow with his clenched hand.

With a growl of pain and rage the ruffian reeled backward against the side of the car.

CHAPTER VIII.

FLIGHT OF THE VAGABOND.

This startling stage of the quarrel was reached just as the train was slowing up at a station.

Bill Leary, as the ruffian called himself, had barely recovered an upright posture when the guard announced "Twenty-third street," and the train came to a stop.

Several passengers entered the car, and Croly quietly said to the ruffian, as the latter turned upon him as though with the intention of renewing the conflict:

"I think we had better defer a settlement to some more convenient time and place."

Leary's belligerent appearance had already attracted the attention of the new passengers, and he realized that this was no time to indulge in revenge. He sank, flushed and panting, into the seat opposite the detective, and bent his shaggy head toward the latter.

"Wait till I have a fair chance, and I'll fix ye!" he growled.

"Oh, I'm willing to wait," Croly returned, coolly twirling his watch-chain.

"I'd like to know what ye wanted of me, anyhow!" Leary said, regarding the seeming dandy with a suspicious gaze.

"Who says I want anything of you?"

"Why did ye come in and sit down in front of me, then?"

"I suppose I can take any seat I choose, if it's unoccupied."

"Ye sot and stared at me till ye got me mad."

"I had a right to do that, too."

"I hate a dude, anyhow."

"And I despise a big, blustering loafer. So we're even."

"Wait till I have a fair chance, and I'll make ye take back them words."

Croly vouchsafed no reply. The train roared on its way, stopping at the frequent stations until Grand street was reached.

There the detective alighted and descended to the street.

He paid not the slightest attention to the ruffian; yet he knew that the latter also alighted, and that he dogged his footsteps as he hastened down the street.

He was now penetrating one of the most lawless localities in the city. The appearance of the buildings became less and less reputable. The day had been quite warm, and the sidewalks were thronged with ragged children, shabby women, and reckless-looking men, having emerged from the rookeries in the vicinity for a breath of fresh air.

Well dressed people became more and more rare. At the corner of Jackson street a drunken fight was in progress.

Croly gave the combatants a single glance, and then paused.

One of them, although sadly intoxicated, yet possessed an air of respectability, strangely contrasting with his surroundings.

He was no better dressed than his assailant, who was a reckless-looking foreigner. But his face, as

it was illumined for an instant by an adjacent gas-lamp, looked almost like the face of a gentleman.

His beard was shaggy, it is true. His hat lay upon the ground where it had fallen, and his long hair was unkempt.

Despite all these drawbacks, the man did not bear that impress of bestial coarseness that marked the faces of most of those around him.

"And that is Carl Brandon, the outcast!" Croly exclaimed, in a low, interested tone.

He cast a hasty glance backward. He saw Bill Leary slouching toward him.

A horse-car jingled past the corner at the moment, and came suddenly to a halt. As it did so a girl alighted, and darted straight through the throng surrounding the combatants, not pausing until she reached the side of Brandon.

Croly instantly recognized the girl as Stella, the beautiful daughter of the vagabond. At the same moment her sweet tones reached his ears, saying:

"Come with me, father—quickly, before the police see you. Please come."

Brandon was a large, strong man, and he had apparently proved his superiority in the conflict, for his antagonist had retreated a few paces, and was wiping blood and grime from his face.

"Yes, yes, Stella," he returned.

And together they hastened away from the spot.

The throng of roughs gave way before them, impressed, no doubt, by the dazzling beauty of the girl.

Croly had witnessed the strange scene with a fascinated interest, admiring the girl, and impressed by the appearance of the vagabond.

But as he saw them moving away, he remembered

that it was in quest of Carl Brandon that he had come to this locality.

The detective started toward them, bent upon securing an interview with the strange man.

But at the moment a shout was raised in his rear.

"A fly-cop—down with him!"

The utterance came from Bill Leary, and its effect upon the crowd was magical.

Croly did not for a moment suppose that the ruffian had suspected his real character. The cry had been merely prompted by the desire to bring the roughs down upon the seeming dandy, not because Leary really knew or thought him to be a detective in disguise.

An angry murmur ran through the motley throng. Some darted off into alleys and door-ways; some stood motionless to watch the affair; and a half dozen of the most desperate characters made a rush toward Croly.

In an instant they were between him and those he wished to overtake, hiding them from view.

"Out of the way, you rascals!" the detective exclaimed, as he was confronted by his reckless foes.

"Down with the fly-cop—quick, 'fore he gives the alarm!" cried Leary.

Croly saw that he was in for it. He must fight his way through the throng of desperadoes, and there was no time for parleying either.

He swung his cane over his head, and brought it down with cutting force.

It was not so much of a toy as it looked, as was speedily proved, for the one on whom the first blow descended was felled to the ground. Another was sent reeling into the arms of his comrades; and the others fell back in dismay. For it seemed to them

that, instead of one cane, the detective was wielding half a dozen, so rapidly did the blows fall.

At that instant a police-signal sounded from some point near at hand, and like magic every rough disappeared.

Croly had come off victorious in the brief, fierce fight, but the delay cost him dearly enough, for Stella Brandon and her vagabond father had completely disappeared.

For an hour the detective patiently searched the vicinity for some sign of the vagabond.

But in vain. At last he accosted a patrolman whom he encountered at a corner.

"Pretty girl with a ragged tough," the patrolman repeated, scratching his head meditatively. "Yes, I saw them," he declared, positively.

"How long ago?"

"Three-quarters of an hour, I should say."

"Which way were they going?"

"Into the building across the way. No. 37, I guess it is."

"And they haven't come forth again?"

"No."

"You're sure?"

"I should have seen 'em if they had. Mighty pretty girl. Your folks, mister?"

"My folks, yes!"

The policeman eyed the putative dandy suspiciously as the latter sauntered across the street.

"My folks, just as much," muttered the policeman. "I guess I won't swaller that yarn."

As Croly neared the door-way in question he perceived a tall figure walking leisurely away. The tall man wore a slouch hat and was smoking a cigar.

"If I could do two things at once I would shadow

that chap, too," Croly said to himself, gazing after the retreating figure.

He paused quite near No. 37, and glanced up at the shuttered windows.

It was an old dilapidated building of dingy brick.

"Stella took her father in there to hide him from the cops," was the detective's mental decision. "And when it gets later they will come out again, and I shall have them all nice and snug. If I go in now to look for them they may give me the slip. It will pay me to wait outside."

In accordance with this reflection, Croly took up a position in a deserted door-way opposite.

For an hour he patiently waited, feeling perfectly confident that his patience would be rewarded.

And he was not disappointed.

The door of No. 37 opened softly, and a man came forth—alone.

Croly thought at first that it was a stranger. But his vision was too keen to be easily deceived.

It was Carl Brandon who had come forth, changed only by the combing of his tangled hair and beard, adding to the air of respectability which belonged to him by nature.

It was the gentle hand of his faithful daughter that had wrought this change in his looks, beyond a doubt.

"That girl is a trump, and no mistake!" Croly exclaimed, half aloud. "But where is she? Going to wait until he gets to a place of safety, it is likely. Well, I must have a word with him before he gives me the slip."

The detective started to cross the street. Even as he did so, however, Carl Brandon darted around an adjacent corner with unlooked for agility.

Croly bounded in pursuit.

Reaching the corner, he was in time to see the fugitive pass around another, this time turning into an alley.

The detective quickened his pace, fearing to lose sight of Brandon altogether.

Then, as ill-luck would have it, he was halted by a policeman.

"Out of my way, you idiot!" Croly breathlessly exclaimed.

He would have pushed the officer aside and continued his chase without a word of explanation, but for the probability of being halted again farther on.

"What's your hurry?" the policeman demanded.

"Look, and be satisfied," Croly returned.

He gave the policeman a single glimpse of his badge; the officer gave a grunt of surprise, and the detective was off again like a rocket.

In through the alley he dashed at a furious pace.

To again lose his man after all his weary search and patient waiting was a result not to be desired.

Croly ran as he never ran before. And he was presently rewarded by seeing the shadowy figure of the fugitive but a short distance ahead.

At the same time he became conscious of a startling fact.

Some one else was running upon the other sidewalk—some one who could run as swiftly as the detective.

The latter caught a glimpse now and then of this mysterious stranger, who seemed also to be in pursuit of the vagabond.

The strange pursuer was tall, and wore a slouch hat, the same whom Croly had observed skulking away from the door-way an hour before.

On and on ran the fugitive, with his two pursuers close upon him. It was a thrilling race.

CHAPTER IX.

AN UNEXPECTED ENCOUNTER.

Croly, the detective, saw that, at the present rate of gaining, the race could last only a few moments longer.

The fugitive seemed to be in a somewhat exhausted condition, doubtless on account of his recent debauch. His limbs tottered as he ran; he staggered several times, and seemed about to fall upon the sidewalk.

He glanced over his shoulder, and saw how close were his pursuers. Then he suddenly darted across the street, thus bringing him nearer the unknown pursuer upon the opposite sidewalk.

Croly instantly divined that the stranger was a confederate of Brandon, and that the latter was crossing over to seek his protection.

Whether the detective was correct or otherwise in his conjecture will presently appear.

As it was, Croly redoubled his efforts to overtake the vagabond before the supposed friend of the latter could do so.

He, too, increased his speed. As he did so, Carl Brandon darted into a dark passage only a few yards distant from the unknown pursuer.

The latter followed, with long, swift leaps, disappearing into the black depths of the passage.

Croly was a fearless man, but not a reckless one. He did not really believe Brandon to be capable of deliberate murder, vagabond though he was. Yet

there was no telling to what depths he had fallen, nor to what extremities he might go if goaded to desperation.

Therefore, believing the mysterious stranger, who had followed Brandon unhesitatingly into the passage, to be a confederate of the fugitive, the detective deemed it the height of recklessness to leap blindly into the gloomy passage, perhaps to be met by a treacherous bullet from his foes.

Hence he resorted to prudence and skill rather than bravado.

He paused at the entrance of the passage, shielding his person behind the corner of a building.

For an instant he listened, but all was still. This seemed to confirm his suspicions that Brandon and his supposed confederate, finding flight useless, were lying in wait for him, at least with the design of temporarily rendering him incapable of continuing the pursuit. The street was deserted, the hour being late. A better time or place for a desperate encounter could not be imagined. For, at best, the most dangerous localities in New York are poorly guarded at night.

Croly was prudent, but he had no intention of abandoning the pursuit. This detective, slender, wiry, and keen-eyed, had followed criminals with the persistency of a hound through the greatest of dangers. He would not shrink from his duty, however perilous it might be, no more than an ordinary workingman shrinks from his labors in the midst of security.

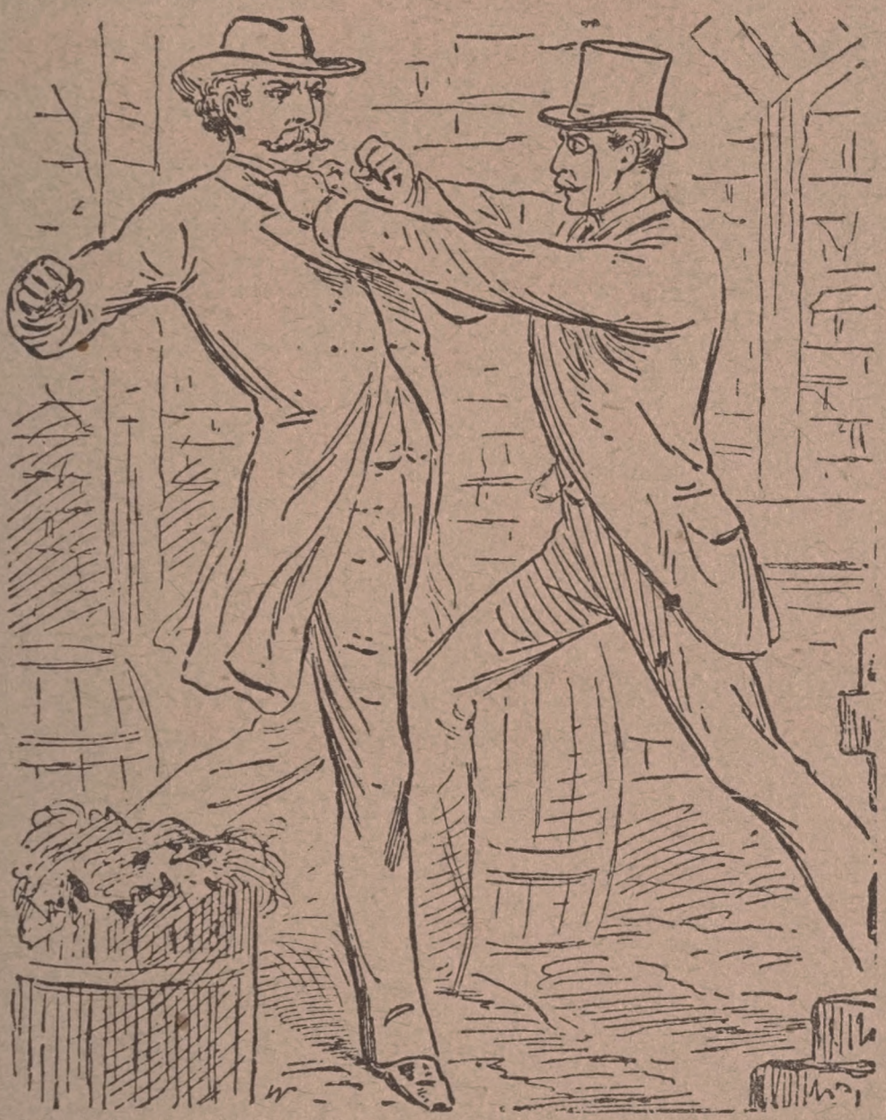
The detective crouched close to the entrance of the passage, and peered in.

Not a thing could be seen. Perfect silence reigned.

The distant tramp of a policeman upon his beat was clear and distinct.

Croly took something from his pocket and tossed it into the passage.

Instantly there was a low "swish" as the missile struck the flagstones, accompanied by a brief, yet brilliant illumination.



AN INSTANT LATER HE WAS GRAPPLING WITH THE UNKNOWN.

Every object in the passage was revealed, but so briefly that of course only a hasty view of the situation ould be obtained.

Croly saw one or two barrels, set out for the rubbish with which they were sure to be filled from the adjacent tenements.

Beside one of these barrels a man crouched, with

his back toward the entrance of the passage. But there was only one person hiding there. Whether that one was Carl Brandon, or the tall stranger who had followed him thither, the detective did not stop to debate. He had an opportunity, and he used it.

Croly's little form bounded into the passage, straight toward the crouching figure; and an instant later he was grappling with the unknown.

The latter had gained his feet despite the suddenness of Croly's attack. And the detective became speedily aware that his antagonist was fully his match in strength, agility, and skill.

With locked arms and shut teeth the two men swayed to and fro, each exerting his powers to the utmost. Not a sound passed their lips save their hard,quick breathing; while the gloom was so dense that they could barely distinguish each other's outlines.

For a full minute the struggle continued thus, neither gaining a single point of advantage over his adversary. The stranger was a giant in proportions; Croly was undersized. But it was training, rather than bulk, that counted in a contest of this kind.

The stranger suddenly released his hold, and stepped back. Croly, with lightning-like quickness, drew and leveled a revolver to checkmate what he supposed to be a treacherous attempt on the part of his enemy.

As he did so the place was dimly illumined by a small steady light. It came from a pocket lantern in the hand of the stranger. And simultaneously the latter exclaimed:

"As I suspected—Mr. Croly."

The latter stared at the dark, impassive face before him in amazement.

"The Hindoo detective!" he ejaculated, although he was only half certain of the fact.

Hyjah, the Hindoo, whose marvelous successes in clearing up the most profound criminal mysteries were the talk of the city, possessed a plain face, which at first glance did not strike one as indicating great intelligence. Yet there was a conscious power

"THE HINDOO DETECTIVE!" HE EJACULATED.

in his presence, a dignity of bearing which could not fail to impress the stranger.

Upon his impassive face none of his emotions were ever expressed, as they are in most faces.

"I think we won't fight any more," the Hindoo remarked, calmly, shutting off the light from his lantern.

"It is hardly worth while, that's a fact," Croly replied.

And they clasped hands with a sincere cordiality, which even the thought of rivalry did not cool.

"We were both in pursuit of the same game, it seems," Hyjah observed, a moment later.

"And we have both missed it," Croly replied.

"For the present, yes."

"I suppose you intended to arrest the man?" Croly asked, carelessly. In reality he was intensely curious to learn why the Hindoo detective was in pursuit of Brandon, the vagabond. Could it be possible that Hyjah, the Hindoo, was at work so soon on the printing-house mystery? If so, how did he obtain a clew implicating Carl Brandon in the affair?

These queries flashed through the mind of Croly; and at the same time he was impressed by a conviction that, if he were to solve this mystery first, he could do so only as a test of skill between himself and the great Hindoo.

"I did not intend to arrest the fugitive," the latter declared, in response to Croly's question.

"May I ask, then, why you were chasing him?"

"For the same reason that you were, I fancy."

"What is that?"

"To question him about the Waldron tragedy. That was my object. Will you be equally candid, Mr. Croly?"

"It is useless to deny what you suspect. But I confess that I am surprised."

"Surprised by what?"

"That you have undertaken this case."

"Why shouldn't I?"

"There is no objection, of course. But I did not

see you about the scene of the murder to-day, and I fancy I watched the locality pretty closely."

"There is a very good reason why you failed to notice me."

"What is that?"

"I have not been within a dozen blocks of the place."

"How does it happen, then, that you were following Carl Brandon?"

Hyjah made an odd sound in his throat that seemed like a suppressed laugh.

"I knew about the old quarrel, that is all. In fact, I was not greatly surprised when I heard of the murder. Probably, Mr. Croly, both of us could place our finger on the guilty man. The thing is, to prove it. Evidence is what I am after."

Croly was more and more surprised each moment. Could it be that the Hindoo detective had the case down so fine as he claimed? Or was he merely playing at "bluff" in the hope of getting rid of his rival?

Croly was on his guard. He admired the impassive Hindoo, but he was not afraid of him. They had tested each other physically. In mental skill the test was only begun.

In the struggle, Croly's disguise had become disarranged, else Hyjah would not have recognized him so readily.

"Yes, it is evidence that we require," Croly replied, in ready acquiescence. He added, with the greatest apparent frankness: "I suppose you suspect whither this Brandon disappeared so suddenly?"

"I have an idea, yes."

"That he skipped out at the other end of this passage?"

"Is that your idea, Mr. Croly?"

"I didn't say it was." Then Croly added, after a brief pause: "I think you and I can do better than try to 'pump' each other."

"So we can. And another thing, while we're talking. This game must be played fairly. Neither of us wish to win by fraud, although I promise you that I shall give no points. You are a younger detective than I am. But age doesn't count in this business, any more than size does. If you win, it will be because of superior skill. If I am the victor, it will be the fruit of riper judgment and experience. Are you satisfied with this rating of our abilities?"

"I am satisfied."

"Then good-night."

"Good-night."

They again clasped hands; and the next moment Croly knew that he was alone in the passage.

He groped his way to the other end of the alley, and peered cautiously forth.

As he did so, he saw something white, like a slip of paper, flutter past his face and alight at his feet.

He stooped and picked up the object. It was a narrow strip evidently cut from the margin of a newspaper.

Hastening to an adjacent lamp, he examined the slip.

It bore the following words, in a coarse scrawl:

"I spin a web to catch fly-cops in.

"SPIDER."

Croly read the queer message; and then pretended to study it closely by the light of the lamp.

But in reality he was glancing upward through his spectacles at a small, dark, oval object that protruded over the edge of a low, flat roof close at hand.

The oval object was motionless for a full minute. Then it began to move.

CHAPTER X.

THE BOY DETECTIVE.

It was nearly midnight when the figure of a boy stole cautiously to a rear door of the great printing-house of Blain & Waldron, and there paused in an alert, listening attitude.

The boy was Steve Lawton, the apprentice, and he was acting upon instructions from Croly, the detective.

"By Jinkins, how still it is!" he exclaimed, in a cautious whisper, glancing out into the deserted street, and then up at the big, dark windows of the building. He carefully avoided looking toward the counting-room, which was the scene of the recent tragedy. Not that he expected to see the ghost of the murdered man—of course not. But it would be rather natural for any of us to look the other way under the circumstances, especially at the hour of midnight.

Steve was plucky, and he had something to do.

"I'm a detective now—a reg'lar fly-cop, chock full of mystery and ideas!" he soliloquized, to further brace his nerves for the ordeal.

"I guess there's nothin' to be afraid of, anyway," he continued, producing a bunch of keys, and proceeding to try them one by one in the door.

"And if there was anything, detectives don't back down. Common street-cops get frightened sometimes, and skedaddle, but fly-cops jest look careless, and keep their eyes peeled, and never think of

backin' down. That Croly is awful smart, by cracky! And I guess he thinks I've got some sand, or he wouldn't put a job of this sort onto me to begin with. I wonder if he ain't 'round watchin' to see if I back out? I wish he was, and I knew it. Then I shouldn't feel quite so awful lonesome. I guess—eh!"

He had found the right key at last, and inserted it in the lock.

But it would not turn.

What was the matter with it?

Steve was perfectly sure he had the right key. He had known which one to use all the time, and had merely tried the others to gain time and—courage. This was the last in the bunch. It was of peculiar shape, and there could be no mistake about it.

The key seemed to fit perfectly, yet it would not turn back the bolt.

"That's queer, by Jinkins!" the boy muttered, tugging away at it with all his strength.

In his earnestness he grasped the knob with his left hand, working the key with his right. In so doing he accidentally turned the knob, and the door swung open.

Then he understood why it had bothered him so, for the door had not been locked at all.

"Somebody must be inside—somebody besides the watchman," the boy exclaimed, craning his neck to peer into the dark interior of the building.

All was still within, and there was not a gleam of light anywhere.

Steve entered, and closed the door, then stood motionless to listen, surrounded by the impenetrable gloom.

He could hear only the loud beating of his own heart, and he wished he could not hear that, for it

seemed to him that he was not displaying so much courage as a detecive ought.

"The night watchman don't go in or out by this door," he reasoned. "And if he did, he wouldn't have left it unfastened. There must be somebody else here, unless they forgot to lock the door to-night, and that isn't likely. Where is the watchman, anyhow? He has to walk over the building once in so many minutes, and he carries a lantern. He must be asleep. If he is, he'll get bounced if I give him away."

Steve groped his way along the passage to a door, which yielded to his touch. Crossing this threshold, he paused to light the small lantern which he had brought.

The lantern was a bull's-eye, furnished him by Croly; and as he sent the focused rays ahead as he walked, the lad felt more like a *bona fide* detective than ever. If he only had a pistol now, his outfit would be complete. But that was forbidden him by the prudent detective. Boys carrying knives and revolvers were all well enough in stories, Croly said, but when it came to real life it was risky business.

Steve was upon the ground floor, where much of the folding and lighter job work was done. He was startled once by seeing what he thought was a shapeless monster rise from amid the gloom of a distant corner; but the rays of his bull's-eye thrown upon the object, showed it to be only a Gordon press—the same on which he was learning to exercise his legs.

But the next moment he really did see something alive—something that glided out through an open door in a stealthy, skulking fashion.

If Steve had stopped to think he would have pur-

sued a more prudent course. But curiosity impelled him to hasten in pursuit of the figure.

He did not speak, and he advanced noiselessly.

He saw the figure reach the stairway leading to the basement, and pass down out of sight. The boy would have followed had he not, in passing over a latticed hatch opening into the basement, caught a gleam of light from below.

Instantly he closed his own lantern, and stooping, peered down through the opening.

He saw a man's figure pass under the hatch, coming from the stairs. He saw a lantern hanging from a hook, and another man seated under it eating a lunch.

Steve could scarce repress an exclamation of amazement as he recognized the two men. For the one eating was George Dyer, the foreman, and the other was Clarence Blain. Dyer sprang to his feet as the latter confronted him.

"So you—you have come," he huskily gasped.

"Got your message, and of course I was curious to know what you had to say," Blain answered, with his accustomed drawl. For a wonder he was sober, and had been from the hour of his unique encounter with the detective.

"Did you come alone?"

"I intended to. But I've a notion that there's been a ghost or something following me ever since I came inside. Beastly lonesome here at night, isn't it?"

"Since the crime, yes. But I shall get used to it, I guess. I must haunt the premises at night for the present, until this mystery is cleared up."

"Is that what you wished to tell me? 'Pon my word, you took a heap of trouble——"

"Wait, and hear me," Dyer interrupted.

There was a more attentive listener over their heads than they suspected.

"I want to ask you," he continued, "if you have a suspicion concerning the murder of your father's partner?"

"Thought likely you had something to do with it, since you skipped out of sight so promptly."

"You are mistaken. I had no motive for doing it. Yet, if they should catch me I should be convicted beyond a doubt."

"And you sent for me to get me to sympathize with your case, and thus to help you out of your difficulty?" Clarence Blain shrewdly asked.

"No, I do not. I expect you to believe me guilty like the rest."

"No reason why I shouldn't."

"Then why did you not bring a policeman with you?"

"Oh, I don't happen to be mean. And besides, I wouldn't take the trouble unless I was sure. What do you want of me?"

"I wish you to take a message to your father."

"Why didn't you send it same as you did to me?"

"Because it is too important to be written, or to intrust to any one not interested."

"Verbal message, then?"

"Yes. And you must not treat it carelessly—you must not——"

Dyer hesitated, and Blain, now intensely interested, asked:

"I must not what?"

"Lose your head with that inside of it."

"Get drunk, you mean?"

"That is it. You might drop a word in that condi-

tion, you understand, which you would give your right hand to recall."

"So I might." The young man's face grew pale with sudden, intense feeling, and he said: "You'd better not trust me, George. I'm a poor stick to depend upon."

Dyer placed one hand on the other's arm, and eagerly said:

"You must do this thing, Clarence Blain, and you must not yield to your fatal weakness."

"Better not trust me," the other reiterated, shaking his head.

"I must."

"Write the message, and I'll carry it."

"I dare not."

"Write it in cipher."

"Cipher messages are solved by skilled detectives. There must be no tangible evidence, nothing for the detectives to get hold of."

"Then send by some other messenger. Name the man whom you can trust, and I will send him to you. But the worst of all is a fellow like me. Why, I shall be drunk before another sunset."

"You will resist the temptation when I have imparted my secret."

"Don't trust me."

"I must, Clarence. Listen—you shall serve me, and you will be prudent, though you have never been before."

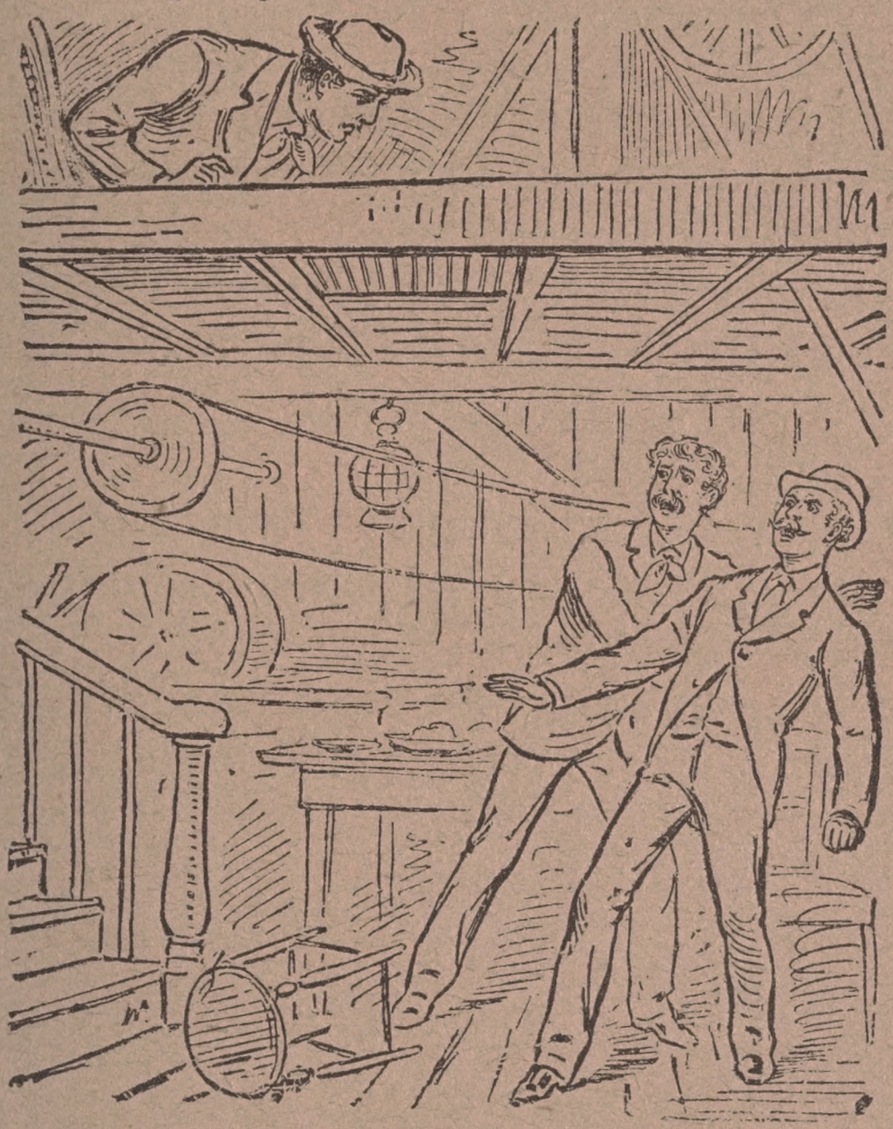
Steve, breathless in his eagerness, crouched closer to the opening, intent upon catching this precious secret, which had a bearing upon the murder mystery.

But, to his intense disappointment, George Dyer bent his lips close to the ear of Blain, and rapidly

uttered the message, but in a whisper which was wholly inaudible to the eager young detective.

The latter, in his disappointment, rose quickly to his feet—so quickly that he accidentally rattled the iron lattice, sending particles of dust down upon the heads of those below.

Instantly both men sprang toward the stairs, which they rapidly ascended.



STEVE ACCIDENTALLY RATTLED THE IRON LATTICE.

Steve realized that he was in close quarters.

He ran swiftly away from the spot, scarce heeding whither he went. His greatest dread was of again falling into the hands of George Dyer, of whose mercilessness he had had sufficient experience already.

In the darkness he collided with various objects, bruising his face and limbs. Twice he fell at full

length. He reached a staircase leading upward, and hastened to mount thither.

His pursuers separated, to make the capture of the fugitive the more certain. As it chanced, Blain hit upon the right track, and followed Steve directly to the upper floor.

Here were the composing-rooms. And here Steve's flight was abruptly terminated by a door which was locked.

He heard his pursuer close behind. He turned, hoping in the darkness to dart past the other, and thus double on his track.

But again he stumbled and nearly fell, betraying his position. Before he could recover himself he was seized by a pair of strong hands.

CHAPTER XI.

A THRILLING EXPERIENCE.

"I've got you, you rascal!" exclaimed Clarence Blain, clinging tenaciously to the boy.

Steve struggled furiously, but his captor was stimulated by no ordinary impulse, and exercised a degree of strength of which he was ordinarily incapable.

"Stand still, or I will choke you!" he threatened, seizing the lad's throat.

Steve realized that to struggle was but a waste of strength that he might use to some purpose if he but bided his time.

He had dropped his lantern, and the slide had partly opened of itself.

Young Blain quickly recovered the lantern, and in another instant had turned the full glare of the bull's eye upon the boy's pale face.

"Ha! Steve Lawton!" he ejaculated.

"Who said it wasn't?" the youngster retorted, panting from his exertions.

"What were you doing here at this time of night?"

"I came after something."

"What was it?"

"My business."

"Tell me."

"Guess not. I was sent here by somebody that had a right to send me."

"My father?"

Steve purposely hesitated, that young Blain might

infer that his guess was correct. Then the boy evasively replied:

"I didn't say he did, mister."

"Did my father send you here?" Clarence Blain repeated, at a loss how to dispose of the lad now that he had caught him.

"I've no right to tell you."

"You must tell me."

"How can yer make me? If you know how to make a man talk, just show me how yer does it."

Blain gave Steve an angry shake, and then said:

"You were listening just now at the open hatch over the basement."

"S'posin' I was?"

"What did you hear?"

"Heard you and another fellow talking."

"Did you see the one who was with me?"

"Yes."

"And recognized him?"

"Course I did."

"Did you hear what was said?"

"A part of it."

"What was said?"

"I ain't going to repeat all you was saying. 'Twas something about a message that he wanted you to carry to somebody, and you was 'fraid you would get drunk and lose it. That was the amount of it, and I guess you will get drunk and lose yer message if you've got one."

Blain looked relieved. It appeared that the boy obtained only an imperfect idea of what had passed between George Dyer and himself, and from this there was no great danger.

"You do not know what the message was, do

you?" the young man pursued, to make assurance doubly sure.

"No, I don't."

"Very well, then—no harm is done. But you must not say anything about this affair to anybody."

"Anything about what?"

"About seeing George Dyer and myself here to-night."

"I dunno as I care anything about it. I won't promise not to speak of it, though."

"You must promise—I mean, you will."

Blain abruptly changed his tone from one of command to one of persuasion. At the same time he produced a silver dollar, and held it temptingly before the boy's eyes.

"You will promise for four or five of these, won't you?" the young man asked.

"No, I won't."

"Why not?"

"I don't fancy having my tongue tied up in that way. Somebody might offer me ten dollars to tell what I overheard, and then I'd lose money, don't yer see?"

"I will give you ten dollars to promise."

"Nixie, mister! You better not be too flush with yer old man's money before he pegs out. He may need it."

"You're an impudent young rascal. I will see that you are discharged from my father's employ."

"Go ahead, if you're as mean as all that. I guess I can find a job more excitin' than standin' on one leg and runnin' a Gordon press with the other."

Blain saw that the youngster was incorrigible, and he reflected that the boy probably knew noth-

ing worth repeating, and therefore it was useless to palaver with him longer.

So he was on the point of releasing Steve when the sound of approaching footsteps caused him to wait.

In another moment George Dyer, the fugitive foreman, appeared, and espying the apprentice, exclaimed:

DYER SPRANG TO BLAIN'S ASSISTANCE.

"So that is the eavesdropper! Lucky you caught him, for he is a dangerous youngster."

Steve's heart sank within him. He knew that Dyer, in his desperation, would not treat him gently. He knew that he was in a decidedly unpleasant predicament.

Again he struggled to break away from his cap-

tor, but in vain. Dyer sprang to Blain's assistance, and together they had no difficulty in holding the struggling boy.

"I do not believe he heard anything of importance," Blain declared, in an undertone to his companion.

"He is a shrewd lad and a sly one," Dyer replied. And he added, with a nervous shrug, "I am running great risk in thus exposing myself, and ought to return at once to my hiding-place. But I cannot do so until we have safely disposed of this boy. He must not go at liberty, at least not unless he will bind himself by a solemn promise not to disclose anything that he has seen or heard this night."

"Will he keep a promise if he makes one?"

"I am confident he will."

"What do you say, Steve?" Blain asked, looking down into the face of the boy.

"I have nothin' to say," was the grim reply.

"Will you not keep the promise?"

"When I make one I will."

"You must yield to us, and at once. You know how you were served when you refused to yield to me," said Dyer, sternly.

"I know that you're a pair of howling big cowards, and I ain't goin' to let either of you drive me. That's what I know."

"There is no use—we must dispose of him," declared the foreman, casting a nervous glance over his shoulder, as though he momentarily feared capture by the police, whom he knew were on the lookout for him.

"How shall we do it? I cannot lend a hand in anything too—too desperate, you understand," declared Blain, in some apprehension, lest he, too, were be-

coming too deeply involved in a criminal proceeding.

"Help me to blindfold and gag the boy, and I will see to the rest," Dyer replied, that look of fierce resolve which Steve had noticed upon one other occasion coming into his countenance.

The boy racked his brain for a plan of outwitting his captors.

Blain still clung to his arm, while Dyer crossed to the other side of the room to obtain some stout cords, for which he knew just where to look.

Steve realized that this, probably, would be his last chance.

Accordingly he resorted to a maneuver which he had used more than once in tussles with boys older than himself in his career as street Arab.

He bent his head slightly toward his captor, and then made an energetic upward spring.

Blain had no time to restrain the movement, and, before he could recoil, the boy's head struck him almost between the eyes with terrific force.

The young man involuntarily loosened his hold upon the youngster's arm with a low ejaculation of pain, for he was fairly dazed by the violent shock.

Steve was ready for the opportunity. Another spring and he was free, while at the same time he snatched the lantern, and then darted out through the open door-way.

His own head fairly spun under the contact with that of his adversary, and it was only by a powerful effort of his will that he was able to direct the course of his flight.

With the aid of his lantern he avoided stumbling over obstacles; and, with his thorough familiarity with every part of the great building, he was able to

make his way with bewildering rapidity through composing and press-rooms and passage-ways, until he could no longer hear the footsteps of his pursuers.

The boy paused at last, breathless and trembling, in the passage leading to the counting-room.

He glanced toward the door of the latter, unable to restrain a shudder of vague fear.

The door was closed, and probably locked. Yet in imagination he could see the stark, lifeless form of his benefactor, as he had discovered it lying upon the floor, behind the desk-railing.

Steve had as yet only partially accomplished the purpose which had brought him hither.

That purpose was to see if George Dyer returned to the printing-house to obtain several articles which, in the haste of his flight, he had left in the main composing-room; and also, if possible, to ascertain the way by which the fugitive made his entrance and exit from the building.

The first part of this errand Steve had already accomplished. But the secret exit from the premises, which was evidently known only to the young foreman, was yet undiscovered.

Now that Dyer knew of the lad's presence in the printing-house, it would be doubly hazardous to shadow the former to his hiding-place.

Steve Lawton knew that the building occupied by Blain & Waldron was an old one, and that it had previously been occupied for various purposes. And he had once heard that there was a secret room or passage somewhere, which had been designed for some unknown purpose by the eccentric builder.

If such a passage existed, what was more probable than that George Dyer had discovered the en-

trance to it, and that the discovery now served him as a clever concealment from his foes?

The boy had not mentioned this conjecture to Croly, the detective, because he had only thought of it.

Having regained his breath, the lad made his way cautiously toward the basement stairs.

His thrilling adventures did not weaken his courage. Instead, he was more resolute than at first.

He found the piece of steam-pipe which he had used once before as a weapon, and with it grasped firmly in one hand and the lantern in the other, he descended boldly to the basement.

As he did so he was thrilled by the sound of stealthy footsteps moving away from him.

He nearly closed his lantern, and cautiously followed.

A moment later the footsteps abruptly ceased. The boy paused, his nerves tingling with excitement. Then, with a sense of vague dismay, he heard a mysterious whirring and creaking all about him.

CHAPTER XII.

STELLA'S PERIL.

Stella Brandon watched her vagabond father until he passed from view. She did not see the figures of the two detectives who followed in swift pursuit, however, else she would not have felt so confident that he would escape.

For a moment she lingered at the window of the dingy brick building in which she had sought refuge with her father when she had led the latter from the midst of his drunken companions. Then she turned to the tall, slender girl who stood by her side.

"I have done the best I can for my poor father, have I not, Katie?"

The latter, who was a pretty-faced and warm-hearted Irish girl, placed one hand affectionately on her friend's shoulder.

"To be sure you have, Stella!" she warmly exclaimed, adding: "It isn't many old topers like Carl Brandon that has the likes of you to look after them —I'll say that for you."

"You do not blame me, Katie?"

"Not at all, Stella. Your father would be a gentleman if he didn't drink so hard. And he is brave and good, too, even when he is that full of brandy that he can hardly keep on his feet. Didn't he knock down the young scamp that insulted me on the street, and then walk home with me to see that I was safe, though he was drunk all the while? I'll never forget that in your father, and I'll stick by ye both as long as the breath remains in me body!"

Katie Byrnes spoke with a warmth that testified to her sincerity, her sunny blue eyes flashing with Irish resolution. She was an orphan, and, like Stella, compelled to fight her way alone in the battle of life.

"I know you are a true friend, and the only one whom I can trust in the world," said Stella.

They were silent for a moment; then a distant clock struck one.

"One o'clock, and I must return to my lodgings!" Stella exclaimed, in sudden realization that she had still something to do."

"Wait till morning now. Sure and you wouldn't go back alone at this time of night?"

"I must, Katie."

"But it isn't safe; and you can stay with me if ye will."

"No; I must go back. I am not afraid. But there is no time to lose. Don't detain me, Katie."

"Sure and you're a plucky girl, Stella. If ye must go——"

For answer Stella Brandon ran down the long flights of stairs to the street door. Kate Byrnes followed, and as she went out upon the almost deserted street, her friend said:

"I shall worry about you, Stella, till I know that you got home safe."

"You need not do that."

"Be careful of yourself, and if you get into trouble again——"

"Yes, yes!" Stella called back, as she hastened away.

As she reached Clinton street she glanced back, and tried to make out if her friend still stood in the door-way. But at that distance, in the uncertain

light, she could not tell whether the door was closed or not.

At the corner she encountered a policeman, who paused and looked anxiously into her face. She had stopped to listen for the jingle of a horse car bell. He seemed to divine what she was waiting for, and said in a kind tone:

"Up car, miss?"

"Yes, sir."

"Last one just passed."

"When is the next?"

"Not till 'most six o'clock."

"Then I must walk. I am sorry to have missed the car."

She started to move on, but the officer, impressed by the beauty and innocence of her face, lightly touched her arm.

"They run all night on Forsyth street, further on," he said.

"That is out of my way."

"Far to go?"

"Fifteenth street, sir."

"I'll get you a carriage, if you wish. You look honest, and you're pretty. Got a girl of my own 'bout your age. Isn't so handsome as you are, though."

Stella blushed under the kind officer's compliments. But she declined his proffered assistance.

"I can walk—I am not afraid," she declared.

And before he could detain her, had he wished to do so, she was hastening away.

She kept on for a number of squares, when she became aware of a startling fact.

She was followed.

A large man, with a slouching gait, trudged in

her rear, accommodating his pace to hers, yet gradually lessening the space between them.

She walked faster and faster; she nearly broke into a run. Still that tramp, tramp sounded close behind, her pursuer's long legs making up in length of strides what they lacked in rapidity.

Hoping to elude him, she turned into a side street, at the same time increasing her pace to a run.

THE MAN PLANTED HIMSELF DIRECTLY IN HER PATH, COMPELLING HER TO HALT.

But tramp, tramp came the heavy footsteps of the mysterious pursuer, no longer disguising the fact that he was bent upon overtaking her.

She had barely reached the next street, which was a broad and better lighted one, when the man came

up with her, bounded past, and then planted himself directly in her path, compelling her to halt.

She attempted to turn aside and pass him.

But he doggedly interposed his burly figure, gruffly saying:

"Don't be in such a hurry, girl!"

"Stand aside, sir!" she breathlessly exclaimed.

She glanced swiftly up and down the street, in the hope of seeing a policeman, but in vain.

The ruffian, who was no other than Bill Leary, the "tough," whom Croly had encountered this same night in the elevated car, seized her arm with one large, brawny hand.

"Your name is Stella Brandon, ain't it?" he demanded.

"Let me go!" she cried, struggling.

"Stand still, or it will be the worse for ye."

"You hurt me."

"Then quit squirming."

Seeing that it was useless to resist, the brave girl ceased her struggles, and said:

"What do you wish, sir? I never saw you before. I am in haste to go home."

"Is your name Stella Brandon, I asked ye?"

"I suppose it is."

"And you are the gal of that old chap that was fighting down on the street to-night?"

"I am his daughter."

"And ye work in the printing-office of Blain & Waldron?"

"Yes."

"Then I can tell ye something you'd like to know."

"What is it?"

"About the murder of Waldron. And about the pistol that did the business. Hey!"

That she was intensely interested Stella could not conceal. The fact that her weapon had been the instrument of crime, and that it had been stolen so mysteriously from her room, and returned thither after the tragedy, was something which not only puzzled but troubled her.

Croly's shrewdness had discovered the startling fact. How did she know but he, or others, would try to fasten the crime upon her? That her father was suspected she knew already. It seemed to her as though the vagabond and herself were being involved in a labyrinth of condemning circumstances.

Leary saw at once that the girl was interested. This was precisely what he desired. Accordingly he released her arm to show that he did not expect her to run away.

She drew away from him, but did not attempt to flee.

"What do you know about the crime?" she asked, with tremulous eagerness.

"I know that Carl Brandon is suspected," Leary replied.

"He is innocent. He would never do that!"

"Why shouldn't he?"

"He is not so cruel, so brutal."

"Maybe he isn't. But your pistol did the work, you know that!"

"It was stolen from my room, and returned before I had missed it."

Leary closed one eye with an air of insolent shrewdness.

"Now you'd be surprised if I told you who stole it, eh?" he asked.

"Do you know?"

"I could make a close guess."

"Tell me then."

"Perhaps I will. But not here, not if I knows myself. Come, and I'll tell ye."

He turned slowly away, beckoning her to follow.

She did so for a few paces, and then paused.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked.

"Where I can tell ye all about this racket 'thout being overheard."

"I cannot trust you, you are a stranger."

" 'Fraid of me?"

"I am cautious, that is all. If you have anything to tell me, say it here."

Leary bent his coarse face toward her, a sudden fierceness blazing from his eyes.

In the dim light she could not see the shrewd cunning expressed upon his face as he said, in a distinct whisper:

"If ye knows when you're well used, come along. There's a fly-cop watchin' us this minute."

Stella cast a quick, startled glance up and down the deserted street. As she did so a figure skulked into an alley, as though in confirmation of the ruffian's words.

Instantly a dreadful fear flashed upon her—a fear founded upon the suspicions which, since first encountering Bill Leary,were gradually taking shape in her mind.

She recalled her interview with Croly, the detective, and his seeming belief in her innocence, and his proffers of friendliness.

At the time she had believed him to be sincere. But a conviction that he merely desired to gain her confidence, that he might afterwards entrap her, now possessed her mind.

She had little reason to trust any one. Once,

when her father had committed some slight misdemeanor, an officer had beguiled her into betraying the vagabond. She remembered the policeman's deception on this occasion, and it was but natural that she should distrust Croly, the detective.

"I'm a hard character, miss," said Leary, in a tone intended to strengthen her suspicions, "and I know all the better how to outwit the cops. I tell ye, you're in close quarters. Come, and I'll see that the cops don't get ye, and at the same time I'll explain how your pistol was stole, and why."

Half unconsciously Stella allowed the man to lead her away. Assailed by new misgivings, however, she again paused.

As she did so, two dark figures sprang from the alley, and ran toward her.

"Come, quick!" cried Leary.

And with the speed of a bird she followed the ruffian in flight.

A menacing shout from her pursuers added to her terror.

CHAPTER XIII.

A DAUGHTER'S FIDELITY.

Stella was not deceived as to the character of the ruffian whose lead she was following. She did not doubt the unscrupulousness of the man. She merely thought that, from his very character, he would be the more likely to aid her in escaping from the officers whom she supposed to be in pursuit of her. And, under the circumstances, the poor girl had as much confidence in the lawless individuals, with whom she frequently came in contact, as the shrewd detectives, who thought only of running the unfortunates to earth.

While, in her terror, she did not hesitate to follow the ruffian, she did not intend, however, to intrust herself entirely to his care.

He led her from the street through several dark passages, and at last paused at the door of a basement.

Their pursuers had, to all appearances, been left far behind, bewildered by their rapid turnings.

"Come, and I'll see that they don't get ye," said Leary, unlocking the door and throwing it open.

But Stella recoiled, saying:

"I will find a hiding-place. I know nothing about this one."

"They'll never look for ye here."

"Whose house is this?"

"It's where I live."

"Do you live here alone?"

"Me and my girl, 'bout your age."

"How do I know you are telling me the truth?"

"No object for me to lie to ye. I don't want ye to fall into the hands of the cops, that's all."

"Why do you care?"

"Can I trust ye if I tell?"

"You can trust me."

"Well, then, I'm mixed up in the racket myself."

"The printing-house tragedy?"

"Yes."

Leary lowered his voice, and continued:

"I knows a heap more 'bout the business than I wish I did. I didn't do it, mind that; but I knows 'bout it. Your father and me know each other, and we're good friends, though he is a 'white' chap compared with me. But he did me a favor once, and I like him. That's why I want to keep you out of trouble."

Stella knew that the ruffian's statement was not improbable. Carl Brandon had many a lawless associate, and that he had won this man's regard was likely enough.

Still, there was something so repulsive in the face and tones of Bill Leary that Stella could not bring herself to trust him.

"You cannot blame me for not wishing to trust myself to a stranger," she said, in a tone intended to conciliate the ruffian.

"Ain't I a friend of your father?"

"I presume you are."

"Then what are ye afraid of?"

"You are a stranger to me."

"I helped ye to get away from the cops just now, didn't I?"

"Yes, and I thank you for it."

"Now I offer you a place to hide from 'em."

"I am not afraid of them. I am used to taking care of myself."

"And you don't want me to help you?"

"I do not need it."

"Pretty way to thank a man for lookin' out for ye. You'd been in the station-house by this time if it hadn't been for me!"

"I might have eluded them alone. Still, I am grateful for your kindness. Only I do not wish to trouble you further."

"No trouble. I want ye to go into this house, and then I'll see that you're taken to a place where the cops won't think of lookin' for ye."

"But I do not wish to stop. I have a friend who will gladly conceal me from my foes."

Not daring to prolong the parleying, Stella sprang away from the basement door, and ran swiftly toward the open street.

Bill Leary speedily proved the insincerity of his intentions by bounding in pursuit, with a muttered imprecation.

With all her might she strove to escape. She fairly flew over the black pavement.

She had almost reached the broader street when she slipped, half recovered herself, then slipped again, this time falling headlong.

Before she could regain her feet she was seized by the ruffian, and lifted in his powerful arms, while one great, strong hand was placed over her mouth, making an outcry impossible.

The shock of her violent fall nearly stunned her; and coupled with the realization that she was in the power of the brutal ruffian, she became partially unconscious.

Of that which immediately ensued Stella Brandon was only vaguely conscious. The bewilderment caused by her terror was deepened to total insensibility under the effect of an anæsthetic.

How long she remained unconscious she could only conjecture, for when she recovered, her situation was so unexpected and novel that it seemed she must be dreaming.

She was lying upon a luxurious couch, in a handsomely furnished apartment. The room was large and pleasant, and the furnishings seemed doubly rich under the soft gas-light with which they were flooded.

For several moments Stella lay motionless, her eyes wandering about the elegant apartment, a sense of present comfort lulling her senses to drowsiness.

But she was soon roused from her apathy by a memory of the occurrences preceding her unconsciousness. She thought of the brutal ruffian into whose power she had fallen; then of the tragedy at the printing-house, of her father's flight, and the pursuit of herself, as she supposed, by the officers.

As these recollections flashed through her mind she sprang to a sitting posture, staring about the room. She saw a man standing near her—an elderly man, whom she instantly recognized.

"Mr. Blain!" she gasped, recoiling under his piercing gaze.

"What does this mean, Stella Brandon?" her employer—for the gentleman was no other—sternly demanded.

"I—I do not know," she returned, alarm added to her bewilderment.

"You do not know, eh?"

"Truly, I do not. Where am I? And how came I here?"

"You are in my house. How you came here is for you to explain."

"I must have been brought hither by—by——"

"By whom?"

"That ruffian."

"MR. BLAIN!" SHE GASPED, RECOILING UNDER HIS PIERCING GAZE.

"What ruffian?"

"The one who caught me, and was determined to take me to his house."

Mr. Blain smiled in an incredulous manner, saying:

"Tell me the truth, Stella!"

"I have told you all I know about it. I was frightened and must have swooned. And—and I think he gave me chloroform, or something of that kind. But I have not the least idea how I came in this room."

"You came only as far as my entrance hall. And there I found you reeling about, evidently not knowing what you were doing. I brought you here, laid you on the couch, and you instantly dropped asleep. I have seen similar cases, even in young and rather pretty girls. But I had no thought of one of my lady compositors becoming intoxicated. Yet such was evidently your condition. Perhaps you can explain more clearly now."

Stella Brandon sprang indignantly to her feet, confronting her employer, an angry light blazing in her eyes.

"That is false, Mr. Blain!" she exclaimed, in a low, clear tone.

"My statement, do you mean?" he returned, in a voice that betokened suppressed anger. "Do you deny being found in the condition I have described?"

"I do not, because I remember nothing of how I got here. I remember only my flight from the ruffian, and his overtaking me."

"Where did this take place? Do you remember that?"

"It was in the vicinity of Pitt street."

"At what time?"

"Between the hours of one and two."

"About two hours ago, then?"

"I do not know how long an interval has passed."

"Is your home in Pitt street?"

"No, sir."

"Near that point?"

"No, sir."

"Then why were you in that locality, alone, at such an hour?"

"I was returning from the house of a friend."

"Are you in the habit of being upon the street until the small hours of morning?"

"No, sir. But this, sir, was a case of necessity."

"Can you explain the case?"

She hesitated. She knew that Mr. Blain bitterly despised her vagabond father. But in no other way could she clear herself from the dreadful suspicions which the singular circumstances had woven about her, than by stating her true reasons for visiting so unwholesome a locality at the hour of midnight.

So she briefly told her story, trusting to the integrity of her employer, whom she had reason to regard as an honorable gentleman.

"So you were looking after that vagabond father of yours, were you?" Mr. Blain exclaimed, in a severe tone.

"I was, sir."

"Are you in the habit of doing this?"

"I render him aid whenever it is in my power to do so."

"Do you think he deserves it?"

"I know he is worthy in spite of his failings."

"Evidently you have inherited from him the vicious characteristics which have made him what he is. Carl Brandon is a scoundrel, girl, nothing more nor less. Do you know who is suspected of yesterday's crime—the murder of my partner?"

"Not Carl Brandon—he is not guilty!" Stella cried, forgetting her own troubles in her anxiety for the vagabond whom she knew, at least, was not so evil as most people thought him to be.

"Of course he is, and he will be proven guilty, too.

Croly, the shrewdest young detective in the country, is 'piping' the case and he will not allow such a graceless rascal to escape. And I advise you, Stella, to abandon the wretch to his deserts. You are young and pretty, as well as clever at your work, and I am willing to do what I can for you. But if you persist in aiding you outcast father you will probably be arrested for complicity in his crimes. Now, take my advice, and renounce him forever."

Stella's brain whirled under the pressure of mystery, danger, and her loyal resolutions. What did it all mean? Was her father really involved so deeply by circumstances that he must inevitably be arrested and convicted? Were that detective's kind assurances really made to gain her confidence? Whom should she trust? She covered her face with her hands; then she looked into the face of her employer, and firmy said:

"I shall not forsake my father when he needs me most. He is innocent, as you will some time be convinced."

Mr. Blain quietly seized her arm and led her to the street door, which he opened wide and said:

"Go, and be a vagabond yourself."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE FUGITIVE AGAIN.

The dark, oval object protruding over the edge of the flat roof, which Croly saw making a movement, was the head of a human being.

Of this the detective was instantly convinced; and with his usual promptness of action he sprang to the fire-escape ladder that hung upon that side of the building.

He scaled the ladder with lightning-like rapidity, clambered upon the flat roof, and was in time to see a small, agile figure drop through an open sky-light.

The building was an old-fashioned affair, and there were several of these windows in the roof, which served to admit light and air to the small, close rooms below.

Croly sprang to the sky-light, and was in time to prevent its being closed by the person who had dropped through. He instantly raised it, and with only a hasty glance down into the room below, he leaped through the opening.

The room was lighted by a single gas-jet, turned very low. It had only one door. And the being of whom the detective was in pursuit was hastily trying to unlock and open this door.

But for some reason the key refused to turn; and the fugitive, with a low, defiant cry, turned upon his pursuer.

Croly's gaze fell upon a dwarfish figure, possessing long arms and short legs, and a small, astute face.

The detective had seen this being before, and upon

several occasions. But he had never made inquiries concerning him, for in the great city of New York one may see many eccentric or deformed human beings—most of whom are obscure and inoffensive in character.

The dwarf raised one arm with menacing fierce-

IN THE DWARF'S HAND WAS CLUTCHED A GLEAMING PONIARD.

ness. In his hand was clutched a small, gleaming poniard.

"Hands off," he warned, as Croly advanced.

The detective did not pay the least attention to the command. He had taken the trouble and risk to follow this strange being to his hiding-place, and he

had no thought of beating a retreat without an investigation.

He seized the upraised arm, wrenched the weapon from the dwarf's grasp, and then whirled the diminutive fellow back from the door.

"Just tell me everything I ask of you, and we won't have any serious trouble," declared Croly, holding his adversary so firmly that the latter could scarce make a show of resistance.

"Let me go," cried the dwarf.

"In due time. But tell me your name first."

"I am called Spider."

"A queer name."

"I'm a queer chap, I expect."

"It was you who wrote on the slip of paper that I picked up on the street a few moments ago?"

"Yes."

"Why did you do it?"

"To see what you would do."

"You have found out, haven't you?"

"I didn't mean to be caught."

"What did you mean by saying 'you spun a web to catch fly cops in?' "

"It was a joke."

"You had an object in it, and you must tell me what it was."

"I did it for fun, I say. I wanted to see how you would act."

"That was not your only object."

"Yes, it was."

"You knew I was a detective?"

"Yes."

"And you were watching me?"

"Perhaps I was."

"And you dropped that slip of paper for a definite purpose?"

"I told you why."

"No, you have not. Now, see if I cannot tell you just why you did that thing."

Spider, as the strange being called himself, looked a trifle anxious. But he responded, in a defiant tone:

"Go ahead, if you know."

"You dropped that message, or whatever you may call it, simply to divert my attention from the work I had in hand. You thought I was pursuing some one, and you wished the person to have a chance to escape."

That the detective's conjecture was correct was confirmed by the expression on the dwarf's countenance.

Croly added:

"Now, what have you to say about it?"

"Nothing," was the laconic response.

"Whom did you think I was pursuing?"

"I suppose you know, without my telling you."

"Did you think it was Bill Leary, the tough?"

"I don't know any such man."

"Carl Brandon, then?"

"That's the one."

"And you wished him to escape?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"He did me a good turn once. I was sick, and keeping shady from the cops, and he brought me things to eat, and led the cops on the wrong scent."

Spider stated the case glibly enough, but Croly instinctively knew that every word the dwarf had uttered was false.

The detective had been informed of Carl Brandon's

many "good turns" from various sources, and he had no doubt of most of the accounts being true. Probably Brandon, the vagabond, had in this way made many friends among the lawless classes in the city.

That the outcast would, upon occasion, befriend even a hideous dwarf like Spider was not improbable. Yet the detective had reason to disbelieve the particular statement so glibly uttered by the dwarf.

"See here, Spider, what do you expect me to do with you?" Croly demanded, in a stern voice.

"I don't know."

"I shall arrest you for aiding in the flight of a criminal."

In emphasis of his threat, Croly produced a pair of handcuffs and made as though he would put them on without further parleying.

"Don't—don't do that, mister," cried the dwarf, betraying genuine alarm.

"Then own up."

"What do you mean?"

"Carl Brandon never befriended you in the manner you have described."

"Who—who told you he did not?"

"I can tell when you are lying. I know that you are no friend of Brandon. Now confess, or I'll take you to the police-station as sure as you live."

"I admit it. But I don't see how you knew. I believe you're one of them clairvoyants that read what a man thinks."

"You will find me as good a clairvoyant as there is in the city," Croly declared.

This was true, although he claimed no supernatural powers in the premises.

Spider evidently believed in so-called clairvoy-

ance, however, for he instantly regarded the detective with a look of intense apprehension.

"Can you read my thoughts?" he demanded, in a husky tone.

"Yes, very plainly. Of course, all things are not clear. They never are to professional mind-readers. But if you state a falsehood I know it at once. So beware."

"I'll own up, mister," Spider declared, with an eagerness which was unfeigned.

Croly believed that he was now on the eve of obtaining an important confession. But he kept perfectly cool. He must not allow the dwarf to distrust his power to discern truth from falsehood.

"If you have anything to say, don't keep me waiting," said the detective, gazing fixedly into the strange being's face.

"Carl Brandon never did me a favor. I am no friend of his, either. But I didn't want you to catch him."

"So I thought. And why did you wish him to escape?"

"So as to earn some money."

"Somebody pays you to help Carl Brandon to escape, I suppose?"

"That is it."

"Who pays you?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"I don't, honest. I'll tell you how it happened. You believe what I say, don't you?"

"I believe all that is true. But remember that I can detect a lie the instant it passes your lips. Your face will tell me, if your lips do not. Your face is very easy to read."

"I will tell you, mister, exactly how it happened. Just after dark to-night, as I was standing at a street corner, a man comes along, and says to me: 'Do you know a man named Carl Brandon?' and I says to him, 'Yes;' and then he says, 'The cops are after him red-hot, and I want you to help him to keep clear of 'em.' Then I says, 'What can I do?' and then he says, 'You're sharp as a trap, Spider, and I know you can fool the cops somehow,' and I says, 'I'll try it.' Then the feller give me five dollars, and then skips. That's the whole story, mister."

"Did you know the man who asked you to do this?"

"Never saw him before."

"How did he appear?"

"Old, with bushy gray whiskers and glasses."

"Disguised, of course."

"Just what I thought, mister."

"And so you wrote that slip and dropped it, to throw me off the track?"

"That's it."

The dwarf grinned, and added:

"And it worked, too. You followed me, and let the other chap go."

"Oh, you are a very shrewd fellow, only you got caught, and if I should put the darbies on you you would laugh out of the other corner of your mouth."

"You won't do that, will you?"

"No. Now show me down to the door, and I will bid you good-night. Stay! have you the money the man paid you?"

"Yes."

"Let me see it."

Spider produced a crisp five-dollar bank note.

Croly glanced at it, and saw a peculiar mark upon the back.

This showed that it came from some person who, from a business precaution, marked the bills which passed through his hands.

The detective produced a five and a two-dollar bill, and gave them to Spider, saying:

CROLY RECOGNIZED THE PERSON AS CARL BRANDON, THE FUGITIVE VAGABOND.

"We will swap."

"All right. Would like to do it that way for a week."

"Now I will go."

When Croly was once more upon the street he said to himself:

"Before I'm twenty-four hours older I'll spot the man that was so anxious for Brandon to escape."

Within half an hour he had ascertained that Brandon had taken a ferry to Greenpoint. And without loss of time he proceeded to Twenty-third street, and was in time for a boat just about to start.

Morning had dawned when Croly reached a quiet highway leading out into the country.

Scarcely had he come out upon the road when he saw a carriage drive swiftly past. It was a doctor's carriage, going in response to an early summons.

It had scarcely passed the detective when the latter saw a man spring forth from among the trees by the roadside, and with marvelous agility catch hold of the back of the vehicle and swing himself into the box, unseen by the driver. Croly, in intense amazement, recognized the audacious person as Carl Brandon, the fugitive vagabond. And away sped the doctor with his unseen passenger.

CHAPTER XV.

STEVE STICKS TO HIS PURPOSE.

With his nerves excited to the highest pitch, it was no wonder that Steve Lawton was greatly startled by the sudden creaking and whirring all around him.

But in a moment he comprehended the truth.

The line of shafting which drove the great printing-presses was in motion. Some one had started the engine, for what purpose he could not conjecture.

In the engine-room he could hear the click of the engine, the crackling sound of the big driving-belt, the faint hissing of steam from the cylinder.

The boy stood listening to the sounds for a full minute, uncertain what to do.

The ring of a metallic shovel upon the cemented floor of the fire-room decided him, and he advanced boldly toward the latter. As he did so the motion of the engine became slower, and by the time he had reached the door of the fire-room it had stopped altogether.

In the door-way he met the night watchman face to face. The man was a brawny fellow; he had a lantern in one hand, in the other the shovel, which he was in the act of hanging upon a hook.

"Eh! what are you here for?" the watchman demanded, espying the boy before the latter could conceal himself.

"I was looking to see who started the engine at this time of night," Steve replied.

"You were, eh? Well, I guess that is rather thin. You were in the building when I started her. You were prowling around, for I heard you some time ago—or heard somebody."

The watchman looked severely at the boy. But the latter did not flinch.

"I came in on business—somebody sent me here that had a right to. It is all correct, so don't look savage. I guess you were asleep, or you'd have known there was something going on here. There were two men prowlin' overhead; I heard 'em talkin'."

The watchman was interested at once. The fact was, he had felt a trifle nervous on account of the murder in the counting-room, and had, consequently, shrunk from visiting that part of the building, as it was his duty to do at least once every hour.

"Honor bright, Steve, did you hear somebody talking up-stairs?" the man eagerly asked.

"Sure as I live, I did."

"Did you see 'em?"

"How could I see 'em in the dark?"

Steve had put his lantern out of sight, so this bit of deception passed unquestioned.

"That's so, Steve; you couldn't. I fancied I heard voices awhile ago, but being nervous on account of the—the murder, I didn't like to investigate. Thought it was my imagination, you see. You won't say nothing about it?"

"I'll keep mum, if you will."

"About your being here?"

"Yes. I was sent here to find out something by a detective. You mustn't say anything about that, either. I merely tell you, so you won't think I was prowlin' 'round for any mischief."

"I won't say anything, Steve. But, about them voices you heard, I guess we'd better go over the building and see that they haven't set fire to it anywhere."

"Perhaps we'd better," Steve assented.

They explored the entire building together, even to the counting-room, where the shadows seemed to dance and play hide-and-seek like ghostly visitants.

But no sign of the midnight visitors was found. Clarence Blain had left the building, while George Dyer, the foreman, had sought refuge in his hiding-place—the location of which was so mysterious.

"Everything is all right, I guess," the watchman declared, as they returned to the stairway leading to the basement.

"Then I'll leave you to look after your business alone," said Steve.

The boy made his exit by the same door which had afforded him entrance, the watchman locking it after him.

He felt that he had learned something of importance, or, at least, had hit upon an incident that the detective would make useful.

"If I could only have heard Dyer's message that he whispered to Clarence, Mr. Croly would call me a brick, sure," the lad mused, as he hastened along the lonely street.

A church-clock clanged the hour of three.

"And I ain't any more sleepy than an owl," exclaimed Steve, as he heard the measured strokes echoed from other and more distant clocks.

He was nearing his lodgings, when he imagined that he saw a man come away from a door-way close by.

He did not take especial note of the fact, however,

and in another moment was opening the door of his lodging-house with his latch-key.

As the door swung open a hand seized him from behind, and drew him backward, while a gruff voice said:

"Hold on, Steve Lawton—I've got business with you."

He turned, and to his dismay encountered the cool gaze of a big policeman.

"Knock my form into pi if I ain't in for it now," was the young typo's mental exclamation.

Aloud he only asked:

"What yer want?"

"I want you."

"I haven't done anything."

"Perhaps not, and perhaps you have. We'll soon find out."

The officer dragged Steve away from the house without more ado. There was a police-station close at hand, and the boy expected to be taken thither. He naturally supposed that some one had seen him enter and come forth from the printing-house, and suspecting something to be wrong, entered a complaint.

Steve was debating with himself whether it was not best to explain to the officer, when the latter suddenly halted him beside a carriage that seemed to have been standing in waiting for them. Then the lad decided to await further developments before explaining.

"Tumble in, boy, and we'll take a little ride," the policeman ordered.

He pushed Steve into the carriage, and followed himself, and the vehicle rattled away over the pavements.

The boy asked no questions, but kept an eye upon their course, for he had heard no order given the driver.

They soon entered Fifth avenue, and presently drew up before one of the older but still elegant mansions near the lower end of that fashionable thoroughfare.

"We'll go in here, I guess," said the officer, pulling the boy from the carriage and roughly hustling him up to the entrance.

A ring brought a quick response. It was Mr. Blain himself who opened the door, and curtly said:

"Come in, Steve," and to the policeman, "All right, my man, you may go."

In another moment the bewildered boy found himself in a large, dimly-lighted room.

Mr. Blain stood before him, gazing sternly down into his face.

"I wanted to talk with you," he declared.

"All right, sir—only half-past three in the mornin' is a queer hour to be sent for in this way," Steve returned.

"It seems you had not gone to bed, if it is a queer hour."

"I had not, sir."

"You were out upon the street?"

"I was."

"What were you doing?"

"Unlocking the door to my lodgin's."

"I meant, what have you been doing on the street until this hour of the morning?"

"Wasn't on the street all the time."

Mr. Blain seized the lad's arm, and shook him impatiently.

"Answer me civilly," he exclaimed.

"Didn't I? Whatcher want of me, anyhow?"

"Tell me what you were doing at this time of night in my building—the printing-house?"

"I went there looking for something."

"Who told you to do so?"

"Mr. Croly, the detective."

"If he had any business of that kind to perform why didn't he do it himself?"

"He had somethin' else on his hands, I s'pose."

"He has employed you as a spy, has he?"

"I dunno as that's exactly what I am."

"Yes, it is; you're a spy, hired to watch my business. I want you to understand that I will not allow it."

"Don't you want to catch the chap that killed Mr. Waldron?"

"Certainly I do, and there are detectives on the case who will attend to it. But you are in my employ—an apprentice in my establishment."

"Mr. Croly wanted me to help him, sir."

"Mr. Croly doesn't own you nor my building. I can't trust boys prowling around the premises at night. I'll have a big fire to pay for, or something of that kind. Do you hear?"

"I hear well 'nough."

"And you will obey?"

"I can't say about that."

"You can't say, eh?"

"Not till I see Mr. Croly."

"Mr. Croly is out of the question, I tell you."

"Not when he's hired me."

"You are my apprentice."

"I'm his'n too."

"I hired you first."

"I guess not, mister. Your partner took me in,

and you said you didn't want no street Arabs for apprentices, but he was willin' to try me. So I guess you needn't kick now I'm ready to do something else."

Mr. Blain's usually calm temper was aroused. He pushed the boy roughly into a chair, saying:

"I shall have to take care of you, young man. You are too impudent by half. I'll have you taken to a police-station."

Before Steve could comprehend his purpose, the man strode from the room. Steve heard the door closed and locked behind his employer; and the click of the lock awakened the lad to a realization of his situation.

Why Mr. Blain was so angry with him he could not imagine. Hitherto this gentleman had paid but little attention to the boy upon any occasion. He was usually pleasant to all his employees, but, as a rule, kept aloof from them during working hours.

"I don't know as I've done anything I didn't have a right to do," Steve muttered, as he heard Mr. Blain's retreating footsteps.

He glanced around the large dim room, and perceived another door and several windows.

He tried the door, but that also was locked. Nor could he raise a window—he did not understand the fastenings. While making investigations he heard the street-door open, and then the sound of voices.

"I guess I won't go to the station-house if I can help it!" Steve exclaimed.

He seized a chair and thrust it through one of the large windows, making a fearful sound of breaking glass.

"I ain't 'sponsible cause glass breaks when you try to bend it," he declared, as he heard excited ex-

clamations outside the door, as well as the sound of footsteps rushing toward the room.

He started to leap through the opening he had made, but changed his mind, and crawled under a lounge instead.

He was just in time, for the door opened at the instant, and Mr. Blain and a policeman rushed into the room.

"The little wretch has broken a window!" Blain exclaimed, his voice hoarse with passion.

"And escaped to the street," supplemented the officer, glancing out through the opening.

"After him, then. Do not let him escape. He must pay dearly for this audacious business."

The policeman leaped through the broken window; Mr. Blain, too eager to remain behind, followed suit.

They had scarcely disappeared before the boy emerged from his hiding-place, and hastily surveyed the premises.

"This is fun, by hokey!" he exclaimed. "Better'n inkin' rollers and sortin' pi. But I guess I'd better skip while I have the chance."

CHAPTER XVI.

FUGITIVE AND DETECTIVE.

Croly, the detective, gazed after the doctor's carriage, with the fugtive clinging to the rear, in sudden admiration, not unmingled with chagrin.

"Whatever they may say of Carl Brandon, it will take a long head to outwit him," the detective exclaimed.

In another instant, however, he had raised a whistle to his lips and a shrill, ear-piercing blast sounded on the air.

The doctor heard the signal, and naturally stopped his horse to see what was in the wind. A backward glance showed him the detective standing in the middle of the road. Of course he could not see the fugitive, ensconced in the back of his carriage, and therefore could only conjecture as to the purpose of the man who had signaled.

The doctor was in a hurry, the hour and that point of the road were lonely, and he was impressed by a suspicion that he was in danger of highway robbery.

So he struck his horse a sharp blow with the whip, the animal bounded forward, and the detective was still further chagrined at seeing the fugitive borne away more rapidly than before.

Still Croly was not ready to give up. He started in pursuit of the vehicle, at the same time uttering a stentorian shout.

"Hold on, sir, you've lost something," the detective cried, at the top of his lungs.

The doctor again slackened the pace of his horse,

and thrust his head out of the carriage, without coming to a halt, however.

"What do you want?" he demanded.

"I said you had lost something," Croly answered back, running at a rate that maintained the distance between himself and the vehicle about the same.

"I've lost what?" the doctor pursued, alert for a suspected trap.

"I will tell you if you will wait a moment."

"I'm in a hurry."

"So am I."

"If you want anything of me, tell me so. If not, I'll leave you."

"Look in the back of your carriage, then."

"What for?"

"A man is stealing a ride."

This awakened the doctor's curiosity to a pitch that could not be restrained even by prudence.

He stopped his horse, leaped from the carriage, and was in time to see Carl Brandon slip from the back of the vehicle and dash toward the woods.

The doctor started to pursue the fugitive; but as the former was short, fat and scant of breath, he immediately abandoned the absurd effort, and left the chase wholly to the detective.

Croly was a trained athlete, and when it came to a foot-race he was not to be easily beaten. He paused for no explanations, but bounded in pursuit of Brandon, plunging into the midst of the thicket where the man had disappeared.

For several rods the detective struggled through the dense undergrowth; but he was brought to a halt in a startling manner.

"Stop, if you would live!" exclaimed a deep, stern

voice, as he emerged into a sort of natural glade surrounded by trees.

Croly was fearless, yet cautious. He saw Carl Brandon standing erect before him, with a revolver in one outstretched hand. The man had a handsome face; his eyes were dark and piercing, and just then they blazed with a resolute fire that added to the impressiveness of his countenance. Menaced thus, the detective promptly obeyed the stern command, halting in the center of the opening. But he did not recoil as Brandon took a determined step forward, nor did he draw a weapon.

"Better put up your pistol; you will not need it," the detective said, in a tone so low and calm that the fugitive was more surprised than he would have been had Croly disregarded his command.

Brandon hesitated for a moment only; then flung the weapon to the ground and calmly folded his arms.

"If there is treachery on either side, it will be upon yours, not mine," the vagabond declared, in his strangely musical tones.

"I think we may become the best of friends," said Croly.

"What do you mean?"

"Merely that I do not believe you guilty of any crime. I am in quest of evidence only, and there is no need of your running away, unless you really fear justice."

"I do not fear justice," Brandon declared.

"Then why do you flee?"

"It is of injustice that I am afraid."

"You think you are in danger of false accusation?"

"I know I am."

"Do you know why I have taken so much trouble to overtake you?"

"Yes."

"Tell me what you think is my object."

"To find out about the murder of Hiram Waldron."

"Why should a detective come to you for information on this subject?"

"Because, I suppose, I was formerly connected with him in business, and because I am now connected with the class of vagabonds and criminals to whose charge all iniquities are laid, whether they are guilty or not. I know how this detective business is managed. If a man is arrested by the police upon any charge, no matter how light, he is put on record as a suspicious character; then he is watched. If he doesn't live a more perfect life than the most respectable of citizens, they soon have a long record against him. Then, when a murder like this one is committed, they look over their catalogue of hard characters, hit upon two or three who might possibly have a motive for the crime, and then watch these unfortunate men so sharply that they are made to do more suspicious things, until they are so strongly implicated that there is no escaping arrest and probable conviction. That is the way it is done, and that is why you are following me in this manner. You mean well enough; you're doing your duty; but that is no reason why I should not distrust you, and look out for my own safety."

Croly, the detective, could not restrain a feeling of deep sympathy for this unhappy man. Indeed he sympathized with all, even the most vicious; for he believed that the spark of immortal aspiration and capability existed in every human breast, and that it was only clouded by ignorance, vice, and the

false precepts which mold the childhood of the masses.

Croly, like all truly great detectives, made a distinction between wrong and the doer of the wrong.

"I said that I did not believe you to be guilty of this crime," the detective repeated, adding, however, in a tone of conviction: "I do believe, nevertheless, that you can help me to bring to justice the real culprit."

"Why do you think so?"

"Because you probably know who were Mr. Waldron's enemies."

"Perhaps I do. But he had few enemies."

"I wish you to explain one or two points, at all events."

"What are they?"

"You gave your daughter, Stella, a revolver for her to use in self-defense, should she need such a weapon, did you not?"

"I did."

"Did you know that it was this weapon which took the life of Mr. Waldron?"

"Stella told me of the result of your investigations."

"Can you explain how it was taken from her room, and by whom?"

"I can."

"Ah!"

Brandon's face was somewhat pale, and he labored under intense excitement, as was attested by a tremor that shook his form.

The detective, surprised at his reply, quietly continued:

"Who, then, purloined the weapon?"

"You probably think I did."

"I do not think so."

Carl Brandon smiled in an odd way, and said:

"That shows that you detectives can make mistakes."

"Why?"

"Because I took the pistol from Stella's room a short time before the crime was committed."

"You took it?"

"I have said so."

Croly did not often yield to the excitement of eagerness. But now, confronted by this startling admission, which seemed to come so close to furnishing a positive clew to the mystery, he could not refrain from seizing the vagabond's arm and sternly exclaiming:

"Then you know who shot Hiram Waldron!"

"I did not shoot him."

"You know who did."

"I did not see the fatal shot fired; I did not hear it. I know nothing about it, save what I suspect, and my suspicions belong to no man but myself."

Carl Brandon spoke with firm deliberation, although he could not repress an exhibition of the intense agitation which he could not have failed to experience.

Croly watched the man's face closely. In a low, commanding tone, he said:

"You must not allow a crime to go unpunished if you can furnish means of convicting the guilty man."

"I shall not state my suspicions."

"Upon the morning of the tragedy you had the instrument of the crime in your possession?"

"I did."

"To whom did you give it?"

"To no one."

"How, then, did it go out of your possession?"

"I do not know, except——"

"Except—what?"

Carl Brandon compressed his lips and hesitated. His voice was firm, however, when he said:

"It is the old story. I was intoxicated, and was foolish enough to show my weapon. An officer stopped, and said he couldn't let me have such a dangerous plaything. I gave it to him, and that is the last I have seen of it. How it came in the counting-room of Blain & Waldron, and the instrument of a crime I do not know. As I have said, I suspect, and my suspicions cannot become another's property."

Croly, in baffled expectation and disappointment, impatiently exclaimed:

"You are an important witness, Mr. Brandon. It is my duty to take you into custody!"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE FLIGHT.

Stella Brandon, friendless and bewildered by the misfortunes which seemed to have conspired to overwhelm her, hastened along the quiet street toward her boarding-place.

"Go, and be a vagabond yourself!" had been the harsh command of Mr. Blain, as he turned her away from the mansion of which she had so mysteriously become an inmate.

There could be only one interpretation of the words. Carl Brandon, the hated outcast, was her father, and he was under suspicion for the terrible crime at the printing-house. She was true to this vagabond father; she had defended his name against what she believed to be unjust aspersions. And thus had she brought upon herself the heritage of misfortune and vagabondage.

Upon the day just dawning and the one to follow, business would be suspended at the printing-house out of respect for the murdered gentleman. Then it would go on again as usual. But what meant Mr. Blain's angry remark to Stella? Expulsion from her situation? It could mean nothing less.

"I am out of work; I have no friends; and, like my father, I must now become a vagabond, for who will employ me?"

This was the poor girl's reflection as she entered the small, cheap room where she lodged.

The day dawned cloudy and forbidding, and upon

the next it rained. During this period Stella scarcely went forth from her lodgings.

Toward the close of this rainy day, however, she made her way to the dingy brick dwelling which was the home of Katie Byrnes.

The latter, with pale, agitated face, met her at the door.

"Come in, quick, Stella," she breathlessly exclaimed, drawing her visitor into the dark, narrow, hall-way, and hastily closing the door.

"What is the trouble?" Stella asked, in sudden alarm, for she had never seen her friend so excited before.

"Trouble enough, to be sure. It isn't five minutes since they were looking for you."

"Looking for me? Who?"

"Why, the police, of course. And nothing would do but I must tell 'em all I knew about you, or be arrested myself. But I sent 'em on a wild-goose chase, that I did. They'll be poking over to the other side of the city in search of ye, for I told 'em you boarded in West Twelfth street—and so you did, a good while ago, as they'll be after finding out when they inquire. This minute I was coming up to warn ye. There may be a policeman watching this door now. But he mustn't get you. Sure, and you're innocent as a lamb."

Stella comprehended the truth in a moment.

"Then I, too, must flee for safety!" she exclaimed.

"You will have to hide somewhere, to be sure," replied her warm-hearted friend.

"Why should I do so. I am innocent of any wrong. You know I am innocent, Katie?"

"Of course I know it. But the police—they're that

blind they can't tell an honest face when they see one."

"They are not to blame, of course. They are told to arrest suspected persons, and they merely do their duty."

"Then it's no harm to them if I send them off to the wrong side of the city to find you, is it? But the papers are all against you and your father. Have you read them this morning? They've got your name in print more than twenty times, though it is little to your credit they say."

The girl had a copy of one of the dailies in her hand, and unfolding it, she directed Stella's attention to the latest news concerning the great tragedy.

As she had declared, the names of Stella Brandon and her vagabond father were brought out prominently, the latter as suspected of direct connection with the crime, and the former as guilty of shielding the man from his pursuers, and probably knowing his guilt.

"Whose work is this?" she cried, when she had finished scanning the paragraph

"If that was said of me, I should be for laying it to some cowardly enemy, that I should. For didn't you say that Mr. Croly, the detective, stood up for ye? Sure, and he wouldn't be so mean——"

"Surely he would, if he thought my father was guilty. The detectives are working for a reward, and they're bound to take some one if they cannot find the real culprit."

"Then it is time you found a place to hide. They shall not harm a hair of your head if I can help it, Stella, dear. It is coming on dark now, and we'll be off together."

"You must not cast your lot with mine, Katie. For if you do——"

"Never you mind me. I'm not the black sheep to turn me back on a friend when she needs one. Come with me, and I'll show you how to outwit the police and the mean curs that are setting them on."

The cheerful speech of the warm-hearted girl awakened Stella's natural resoluteness of purpose.

"I shall not let them take me if I can help it," she firmly declared, joining her friend in her preparations for flight.

An hour later they stole forth upon the street, both so muffled and disguised that it would have been difficult for one familiar with them to make sure of their identity.

They made their way to one of the least crowded ferries to Long Island City, and were soon on their way to the other side.

They had scarcely landed at the Long Island City slip, when Stella, with a thrill of horror, saw a familiar form coming toward them.

It was a slouching figure, and a coarse, reckless face that met the startled gaze of the girls—the face and figure of Bill Leary, the "tough."

He passed quite close to them, but gave them only a passing glance.

"He did not recognize us," Stella exclaimed, clutching the arm of her friend.

"Who is it?" the latter asked.

"His name is Leary—the same with whom I had such a strange adventure night before last."

Stella had already acquainted her friend with the details of that experience.

"We needn't be afraid if he doesn't know us."

"Yet I am afraid to have him so near."

"Come, then, and we'll leave him a good distance behind ere he can have a chance to suspect who you are."

They hastened through the throng of people in the vicinity of the ferry, soon reaching a quiet street, along which they made their way to a railway station. And a little later they were whirled out into the country upon the Long Island Railroad—out past the small suburban villages toward the more rural districts beyond.

"If Cousin Mary is the woman that she once was, she will keep you safe in her own snug house, where the police will never think of looking for you," said Katie, as they sped along.

The drizzling rain of the day had set into a pouring rain after sunset, and the great drops splashed upon the car windows in long streaks, while the darkness was so intense that not an object was visible outside, save the glimmering lights from the occasional cottages which they passed.

When the train stopped at last at the small station which Katie had chosen as a haven of refuge, the storm seemed to have reserved all its concentrated fury for the moment.

The two girls and a man were the only passengers to alight. The latter immediately disappeared, but Stella and her companion lingered under the dripping station awning, trying to make out which way to go.

The lamp upon the side of the station glared in their faces, blinding them to all other objects.

They entered the waiting-room, but found that deserted. The station-agent, a big, red-faced man, thrust his head into the room, gave the girls a single

scowling glance, and then closed the door with a bang without vouchsafing a word.

"We must walk up to my cousin's house in spite of the storm, for they don't have any cabs in this out-of-the-way place," said Katie, when they had wrapped themselves in their waterproofs and returned to the depot platform.

"How far have we to go?" Stella asked, as they found their way to the muddy road.

"It is half a mile up to the village, and we'll be drowned in the mud before we get there, at this rate."

There were trees upon both sides of the lonely road, and the way was intensely dark.

Still, they picked their way, under the pouring rain and gusty wind.

Suddenly Stella laid her hand warningly on the arm of her friend.

"There is some one behind us!" she exclaimed.

A heavy tramp, tramp had become audible at the moment, and they could discern a slouching figure coming toward them.

"Likely it is the depot master," said Katie.

Yet, even as she spoke, she was convinced that her conjecture was not true.

They involuntarily quickened their footsteps. And the slouching figure in their rear followed their example.

"Oh, let us run—run!" Stella whispered, seized with a sudden, overwhelming fear.

Clasping hands they began running up the ascent, the rain beating in their faces, their feet sinking in the soft mud at every step.

Then their worst suspicions were confirmed; for

the man behind them began running, also, and at a pace that quickly brought him up with them.

"What are you afraid of, eh?" the man demanded, as the fugitives came to a stop, clinging to each other.

Stella recognized the voice upon the instant. Their pursuer was Bill Leary, the New York ruffian, with whom she had already had such a thrilling experience. In some way he had penetrated their disguise, and followed them hither.

"What do you mean, sir, by following us?" Stella demanded.

Although in mortal dread of the ruffian, her perils nerved her to a desperate courage.

"It is bad manners you're showing, I'll say that for you," supplemented Katie.

Leary made no response. He glanced up and down the lonely road, and then leaped toward the girls.

They recoiled with a scream, but he succeeded in seizing Katie by the arm. With rude force he tore her from her companion.

But the Irish girl, vigorous and courageous, resisted him with fierce desperation, while Stella sprang to her friend's assistance.

The ruffian for a few moments found it no easy matter to resist the fierce attack of the pair. But with aroused anger, he succeeded in striking Katie a savage blow that sent her reeling to the earth. Then he turned upon Stella.

But the latter had slipped away from him. In her place, however, stood a tall figure, who, before the ruffian could flee, reached out two powerful arms and grappled with him. And the two girls, in deep bewilderment, beheld their foe and the tall stranger moving through the gloom in rapid evolutions.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A SKILLED SHOT.

As Croly, the detective, uttered the remark which closes chapter sixteen, he advanced and placed one hand lightly upon the arm of the vagabond.

Brandon did not stir a muscle. But a sudden, fierce light flashed from his dark eyes, and in a low, cold voice he exclaimed:

"Do you mean to arrest me, sir?"

"Why should I not? You know, without doubt, who committed the dastardly murder of Hiram Waldron, and yet you refuse to give me the light which it is in your power to give. Thus you become the same as an accomplice of the murderer."

"I told you I did not know."

"You say you suspect."

"Which I have a right to do. A man may have suspicions, and yet be unwilling to disclose them."

"I would hold nothing back that would lead to the clearing up of the mystery."

"What you would do and what I will do are two different things. My suspicions are my own, and for the present they remain so."

"Then, as I said, it becomes my duty to arrest you."

Croly's purpose was not, as it might seem, to bulldoze the outcast into making a confession. He did not suspect Brandon of complicity in the crime, but he believed, if permitted to go free, the unknown conspirator would manage to use the unfortunate

man as a foil, implicating him more deeply than ever in the crime.

Thus the detective's efforts would be hampered. Therefore his determination to place the vagabond temporarily under arrest was as much in the interest of Brandon as his own labors.

The latter drew himself to his full height. And, in a deliberate tone, said:

"I have a duty also, and when it comes to duty you will find me quite as faithful as yourself."

For a moment the two men looked into each other's eyes, and Croly experienced that indescribable thrill which only a powerfully magnetic gaze can give.

"What is your duty?" the detective asked, more to draw out the other than anything else.

With unexpected agility the vagabond leaped backward, at the same time sending out a powerful, well-directed blow with his clenched hand.

The blow was unlooked for. Yet Croly partially warded it off, although its force sent him reeling backward several paces.

This gave Brandon a momentary advantage, and he followed it up in a startling manner.

Recovering the weapon which he had flung upon the ground, he aimed it quickly at the detective, and fired.

They were not separated by a dozen feet. Croly's quick eye noted the direction of the vagabond's aim, and saw that no vital part of his body was menaced. Hence he acted according to the only wise course, although it was as severe a test to his nerves as he had ever sustained. The instantaneous thought flashed through his brain:

"If I try to avoid the shot I may be struck in a

vital spot. He intends only to frighten, or, at worst, to temporarily cripple me. I must let him do it."

Such a thought takes form in an active brain much more quickly than words can express it. The purpose and its fulfillment were simultaneous.

Hence, as the pistol report rang on the still morning air, reverberating through the surrounding woods, Croly stood motionless as a statue, and experienced that hot, stinging sensation which a bullet imparts in grazing the person.

It was his right leg that was struck, and it seemed to him that only the skin was grazed by the bullet. But, as Brandon turned to flee, and Croly sprang forward to overtake him, the wounded limb succumbed to his weight as though paralyzed, and the detective fell headlong to the ground.

Pursuit then would be unavailing, even if the detective could have used his limb, for the fugitive had a good start, and was uninjured.

Croly sat up and hastily examined his injury. As he had supposed, it was only a slight one, yet inflicted at a point that temporarily paralyzed his limb.

"He intended to do just this and no more, and he succeeded in a way that shows him to be a prime shot," the detective explained, proceeding to bandage the wound and stanch the flow of blood.

In ten minutes he could stand and walk without much difficulty.

But he did not pursue the fugitive. He could find the latter whenever he chose to do so, and there was no hurry in that direction.

He returned to New York, partook of breakfast at a restaurant, and then made his way toward the lodgings of Steve Lawton.

As he neared them, who should he see but the boy himself running toward him as if for dear life, and hotly pursued by a policeman.

"Gracious, ain't I glad yer happened along 'bout now!" the lad panted, halting at the detective's side, and quickly facing his pursuer, who hastened up to them flourishing his club.

"Don't yer touch me, 'less yer wants a broken head!" Steve exclaimed, defiantly facing the officer.

"I don't think I shall be frightened by a boy," declared the policeman, reaching out to seize the youngster.

"You will let him alone,all the same, until you tell me what you intend to do with him," the low, mild tones of the detective interposed.

"What have you to do with the affair?" the policeman demanded.

"Nothing, except that I shall protect the boy."

"Rather cool, aren't you, to dispute the authority of an officer?"

"Perhaps I am, but I shall take the risk. I am just about as much of an officer as you are, and I have a few grains of authority when it becomes necessary to use it. What has this lad been doing?"

"He broke a gentleman's window—was playing thief, I suppose."

"Whose window did he break?"

"Mr. Julian Blain's."

"Ah! possibly he did. What have you to say, Steve?"

The boy briefly stated the facts as they are already known to the reader. When he explained the clever ruse by which he had escaped from the gentleman's mansion, Croly smiled approvingly.

"You'll do, my boy," he said, and Steve felt that

his shrewdness was appreciated by this clear-sighted detective.

The policeman stared at him in bewilderment.

"So you didn't leave the house when you broke the glass?" he exclaimed.

"Not much. I broke the window for you and Mr. Blain to go out by. When you were gone, I went out by the door, that you left open for my benefit," said Steve.

Croly smiled again, and the policeman scowled.

He recognized the detective, but did not fancy being defrauded of his revenge for the lad's trick.

"I have orders to arrest the boy," he said, determinedly.

"Who gave you the orders?" Croly asked.

"Mr. Blain."

"Well, I will take the liberty of countermanding them. I tell you to let the boy alone."

"I must do my duty, Mr. Croly."

"You're not obliged to do an impossibility."

"What do you mean?"

"If you take him you will have to take me, too, and I won't give in without a struggle. So if you are going to pull us both in, begin the picnic as soon as you can, and have it over with."

Without waiting for the officer to "begin the picnic," however, Croly hastily led the youngster toward a passing car, stepped aboard, and before the slower-brained officer could make up his mind what to do, he was too far in the rear to do anything.

The detective took his boy assistant to his private quarters.

Scarce a word passed between them during the trip. But in the detective's private room Steve gave expression to his wonder in a low whistle.

"If you haven't got a lot of queer things!" he exclaimed, staring at the many curious objects with which the table and shelves were strewn.

"I will describe and explain them to you presently," said Croly, admiring the keen, observant glance of the lad. "But first," he continued, "I wish you to tell me what you have been doing. I told you to visit the printing-house last night, and see if you could discover anything about George Dyer. Did you succeed in doing so?"

"I got into the buildin', and I saw and heard something curious," was the reply.

"What did you see and hear?"

Steve related his experiences in detail. The intelligent eyes of the detective sparkled with eagerness.

"And that is all?" he questioned, as the boy ceased, having recounted the incidents which we have given in the tenth and eleventh chapters of our story.

"That is all, sir," the boy answered.

"So Dyer wished to send a communication to Mr. Blain, and dared not trust it in writing?"

"So it appears. And Clarence Blain didn't care to take it, for fear of getting drunk and blabbing. I guess it was a mighty 'portant message, don't you think so, mister?"

"I should say it was. And another thing, I must find out what it is. I must see Clarence Blain—that is the first thing on the docket. Then I must experiment with my little clew, the bloody thumb-print. And if I don't have somebody under my thumb one of these fine days, I shall miss my calculations, that is all. Now, let me give you some more directions, Steve. Keep your eyes and ears open, and see that

you do not fall into the toils. I'll risk you anywhere, if you only do not try to be too smart. That is the only trouble I ever have with boys in employing them to accomplish important missions. They often try to do more than they can carry out."

Croly followed with several minute directions, which he charged the boy to bear in mind.

Then Steve went to his own lodgings to get some sleep, of which he was sorely in need.

When the lad had gone, Croly proceeded to make several important preparations, the result of which was to be a test of his strange clew, the bloody thumb-print.

During the entire day the detective remained in his laboratory, only going out for a hasty lunch during the time.

Upon the next morning he made his way toward the mansion of Julian Blain.

As he ascended the steps he saw two men standing upon the porch, engaged in animated conversation.

One was the Hindoo detective, whose passive face contrasted strongly with the excited countenance of the other, who seemed stricken with mortal terror.

The latter was Clarence Blain.

CHAPTER XIX.

AN UNEXPECTED ENCOUNTER.

Stella Brandon was so bewildered by the rapid succession of events, her own terror, and the surrounding gloom, that for a moment after she saw her friend struck down she stood motionless and irresolute.

She realized that Leary had been attacked by some one, and that he had his hands full for the present, at least.

That the ruffian's assailant was an officer from New York she naturally inferred, and the fact, instead of dispelling her fears, intensified them. For she feared the officers scarcely less than she did the lawless ruffian.

Springing to the spot where her companion had fallen, she found the latter in the act of rising to her feet.

"The villain, to strike down a girl! Where is he?" exclaimed Katie Byrnes, angry and breathless, but unhurt.

"Some one has attacked him, and he has his hands full for the present," Stella returned. And she eagerly continued: "But we must not stay here a moment. If his assailant is an officer, our peril is greater than ever."

"That is so. But it isn't easy to find our way in this darkness. I really believe that it is raining ink, for I never saw a night so black in all me life."

The resolute Irish girl grasped the hand of her

companion, and together they resumed their flight along the dark, muddy highway.

Had they only known that they were fleeing from one who would have proved their most substantial friend, their action would have been very different indeed.

For the one who had attacked Leary was the brave Hindoo detective; and he had followed them for the express purpose of guarding them against their foes.

Yet had they known the identity of the detective, without knowing of his purpose, they would doubtless have refused to trust to his protection. Hence, in blindness to their own welfare, the two girls fled from their best friend—fled on and on through the darkness and storm, into new and unfathomed depths of danger.

For an hour they struggled along the muddy road. The ascent grew steeper at every step, and they became presently aware that the road was narrower, and densely shaded on both sides by tall trees.

Katie came suddenly to a halt, uttering a gasp of dismay.

"I believe we're wrong!" she exclaimed.

"Wrong—how?"

"We've gone off on a cross road, some way. It was so dark that I didn't notice. But I know it isn't this far from the station to the village. And I know, too, that the road we ought to have taken isn't so narrow nor steep as this one."

"Then we're lost, I suppose."

"If it wasn't for the darkness we would soon find the right road."

They were silent for a minute, the rain beating in their faces. Stella was next to speak.

"What shall we do?" she asked.

"We can go back."

"And fall into the hands of our enemies, it is likely."

"Then we can go on."

"That is the only way. We may come to a house, where they will take us in for the night."

"Like the pair of tramps that we are."

Again they pushed on up the hill. A moment later Stella exclaimed:

"Yonder is a light."

Sure enough, there was a faint glimmer quite close at hand. They hastened toward it, but the light seemed to be suddenly extinguished, and once more they halted.

"If it is a house the folks have gone to bed, it is likely," said Stella. "Yet it is ouronly chance of obtaining shelter, so let us make bold to seek admittance."

As they advanced, they beheld the dim outlines of a low, shapeless building—neither a house nor a barn. It was a mere shanty of rough boards, without window or door. One entire end was open to the weather, serving as an entrance. All was dark and silent within.

"Shall we enter?" Katie asked, in a whisper.

"Why not? We can thus escape the rain until morning, and then we can find our way to better quarters."

"But the light that we saw—you forget that."

"Some one may have passed with a lantern."

"Sure, this is an uncanny place, Stella. But if you're not afraid, it isn't the likes of me to forsake you."

"I fear nothing except pursuit."

Stella Brandon led the way, stepping cautiously

into the hut. Of course she could not discern an object before her. She cautiously groped her way for two or three paces, and then tremblingly demanded:

"Is there any one here? If there is, let him speak."

Katie, usually courageous, was timid now. She would not shrink from visible dangers. But the unseen and unknown perils were to her the hardest to defy.

They waited breathlessly for a response to Stella's challenge. But none came. A loose board upon the hut was rattled by a passing gust of wind; this was the only sound audible above the patter of the rain and rustle of the overhanging foliage.

"Come—we have nothing to fear," said Stella, her courage returning.

They entered and sank down upon the mossy earth, which was the only floor of which the hut could boast.

Fortunately it was dry, and the girls experienced a sense of comfort and security such as they had not known since the commencement of their flight.

Attaining a comfortable position, and lulled by the pattering rain and whirring foliage, the fugitives fell asleep.

How long they slept they did not know. They were awakened with a start. Both sprang to a sitting posture, clutching each other's hands. They instantly recalled their situation, and realized that some unusual sound must have awakened them, for they were too greatly fatigued to have been aroused otherwise.

"What is it?" Katie asked, in a whisper.

"I'm not sure."

"What do you think it was, then? Sure, and we heard something."

"It sounded like a shout. Hark! there it is again."

Above the sounds of the storm came a prolonged, dismal cry, that caused the two girls to clasp each other's hands in terror.

"A call for help, wasn't it?" was Katie's whispered query.

"I think not."

"Sure and it didn't sound human at all. I believe it is a spirit, Stella."

"Nonsense. It was a man or—— There!"

Once more the cry sounded above the storm. This time it was nearer than before, and there was no mistaking its character.

"It is a hound," exclaimed Stella, with a sigh of relief.

"Maybe there's a hunter roving about in the woods, then."

"Very likely."

"And who knows but this is his hut? But he wouldn't be so unkind as to turn us out of doors in the storm, I am sure."

"Of course not. If he does not betray us to our pursuers, I shall fear nothing else."

Again and again the baying of the hound sounded on the night air, each time nearer than before. But presently it ceased, and for a long interval it was not heard.

The fugitives rose and went to the open end of their shelter.

It was still raining heavily, and the wind careered wildly through the tree-tops.

As they stood and listened they heard a crashing of undergrowth close at hand; and then, so loud and near that they recoiled in terror, they heard the deep bay of the hound.

The animal bounded directly toward them, and his lank, wet body came in contact with Stella's hand. She patted his head fearlessly, saying:

"We have nothing to fear from the beast, Katie."

"But his master may not be so kind."

"And he may be kinder. At least we can again flee if it comes to that."

"Or we can fight, to be sure. Haven't I got a pistol? And I can use it, too."

"Hark!"

The sound of human footsteps approached. Peering out into the darkness, only the swaying branches of the trees were visible. But a voice, crisp and distinct, called out:

"Nero, where are you?"

Stella caught the hand of her friend in sudden terror.

"I have heard that voice before," she breathlessly whispered.

"Who is it?"

"I—I cannot think."

"It isn't the detective, Croly?"

"No."

"Nor a policeman that you have spoken with?"

"I think not. And yet how familiar the voice sounds!"

The dog, for some reason, did not obey the man's call. He crouched close to the girls, and did not stir.

"Where is the hound?" impatiently exclaimed the voice from the darkness.

Then the footsteps approached, and the girls dimly saw a man's figure cautiously advancing.

"Shall we flee?" Katie asked, in the ear of her friend.

"Wait. If I could only recall where I have heard that voice before."

"Is it that ruffian, Bill Leary?"

"Oh, no."

"It is strange you can't remember. But if we are going to run from him we haven't a minute to lose."

"We will stand our ground. I do not believe this hut belongs to him, and there is no need of running from a shadow. Here he comes. I will challenge him."

And in the same breath the brave girl demanded, in a clear tone:

"Who are you, sir?"

The man halted, uttered a startled ejaculation, and then exclaimed:

"A woman in this place! Ah, there are two!"

As he spoke the man produced a lantern, which had been concealed until then.

The light flashed into the faces of the girls, at the same time illuming his own.

"Stella Brandon!" the man cried, huskily.

"George Dyer, the missing foreman!" uttered Stella, in consternation.

It was a strange meeting.

CHAPTER XX.

THE RIVALS MEET.

As may be imagined, Croly's interest was keenly excited by the scene upon the steps of the Blain mansion. The knowledge of the Hindoo detective's almost fabulous skill in detecting the most secret crimes, and unearthing clews where no clews seemed to exist, Croly naturally apprehended danger from the rivalry.

Never before had the two great detectives been engaged upon the same case.

The Hindoo was older and more experienced. His methods were original and marvelously successful. Croly, on the other hand, was a comparatively young man, with a reputation to make. Should he win over his distinguished rival upon this blind case, and through that unique clew of his, then his reputation would at least be on a plane with that of the wonderful Hyjah.

The detective quickly ascended the steps, and was in time to hear Clarence Blain exclaim:

"I tell you I know nothing of the crime. I do not know where George Dyer is hiding."

Croly advanced in an unconcerned manner, and asked:

"Is your father within, sir?"

"He is in bed, I think, sir," answered the young man, visibly shrinking under the penetrating gaze of the detective.

"Then I could not see him?"

"If necessary, sir. But it is yet early.

"It doesn't appear to be early for you."

The young man averted his face, and seemed on the point of entering the house. At the same time the Hindoo, having nodded in recognition of his rival, turned to depart.

Croly, stepping between them, quickly placed a hand upon the arm of each.

"Do I interrupt an interview?" he questioned.

"We had finished," Hyjah quietly replied. And he added: "Pardon me if I leave you, as I am in great haste."

He descended the steps, while Croly turned to the young man, saying:

"Then it is my turn; so you need not go in."

"What can I do for you, sir?" Clarence Blain coldly inquired, recalling the summary treatment that he had received at the hands of this slender, wiry man upon a former occasion.

"You can give me some very valuable information, if you will," Croly declared.

"I may not choose to do so, if I can."

"You may not act wholly according to choice in the matter, young man. Upon another occasion, if I remember rightly, you desisted from persecuting a young lady somewhat before you chose to do so. Do you remember it?"

"You meddled with that which did not concern you, sir."

"That is all right."

Croly's eyes gleamed from behind his spectacles in a way that made the young man feel very uncomfortable.

The detective continued, in a milder tone, however.

"Of course, I am seeking information only con-

cerning the criminal mystery which I am trying to solve. And you are doubtless as eager as myself to have the matter cleared up. I do not wish to be discourteous, but I shall expect direct answers."

Young Blain was silent, but it was plain that he was ill at ease. After a pause that was unpleasantly long, he asked:

"What do you wish to know?"

"In the first place, are you acquainted with George Dyer, the missing foreman?"

"I knew him slightly."

"Are you familiar with the details of your father's business?"

"I am not."

"What is your employment?"

"I am a gentleman of leisure. I do not like business; I detest work, and I do as I please in these matters."

"You are candid to admit it."

"I intend to be candid, even though I am a scapegrace. That is what I am called, and I suppose I am one."

"You visit the printing-house sometimes?"

"Frequently."

"For what purpose?"

"To see that pretty compositor, usually."

"You are in love with her, you say?"

"I am, and I'm not ashamed of it."

"Would you make her your wife?"

"Gladly, if she would consent."

"When were you at the printing-house to see her last?"

Croly asked these preliminary questions to throw the young man off his guard and calm his excessive agitation. And the ruse was succeeding admirably.

Clarence Blain seemed reassured, and calmly replied to the last question:

"I have not met her since the day of the tragedy."

"Have you tried to see her since?"

"No, sir."

"Do you know where she lives?"

"I do."

"And you have not been there?"

"No, sir."

"You have been once to the printing-house since that day?"

"No, sir."

"Tut, tut. Tell me the truth, and keep clear of tangles that you will have to unravel afterward. You have been at the printing-house, as I said, since the day you mention."

Clarence started, and eyed the detective with sudden suspicion.

"Have you been shadowing me?" he demanded.

"No."

"Then why do you dispute my statement?"

"Because I know better. You visited the building at near midnight, night before last."

The young man caught at a pillar for support, his face growing deathly white. But by a powerful effort he controlled himself, and exclaimed, in a tone of comparative calmness:

"I did visit the printing-house at the hour you mention, but not to meet Stella Brandon."

"What was your errand?"

"A private matter."

"An appointment?"

"Yes, sir."

"With George Dyer, the foreman?"

Instead of growing more excited the young man became calmer. He firmly answered:

"I went there to meet George Dyer, the foreman."

"How did you know you would find him there?"

"He made the appointment."

"You saw him?"

"I did, sir."

"And received a communication from him?"

"Yes."

"Concerning the murder of Hiram Waldron?"

"Indirectly."

"Will you state the communication in detail?"

"I am not at liberty to do so, sir."

"Does it implicate any one?"

"It does."

"Then what right have you, young man, to withhold the facts?"

"Because there is a divine law of fidelity above the human law of vengeance. You detectives seek only to punish unhappy human beings for so-called crimes which you would yourselves commit under like circumstances. I will tell you frankly, Mr. Croly, that I have evidence involving some one in this crime. But it implicates an innocent person—one as innocent as an angel."

Croly was impressed by the sudden vehemence of the young man. The latter's words, although seeming to admit much, yet left the truth as deeply hidden as before.

The detective regarded the other fixedly for a moment, and then quietly said:

"You are attempting a wild impossibility, my man, in trying to shield a guilty person by so plain a subterfuge. You expect me to infer from your words that the person implicated is a woman—per-

haps that pretty compositor. Perhaps they have masculine angels, but when that epithet is used as a comparison, we generally infer that a female is alluded to. You probably love your father dearly, for he is evidently very indulgent. But I fancy he would smile to be called 'innocent as an angel.' Of course I know you refer only to him."

Clarence Blain recoiled with a startled cry, his lips white and quivering, his small, delicate hands clenched.

One of those small hands was thrown outward with impetuous force, and but for a timely movement to one side the detective would have received the full force of the blow upon the side of his face.

Before the young man could repeat the audacious attempt, however, his arms were seized in a grasp of iron, and he was forced back against the closed door.

In vain he struggled and writhed under the stern gaze of Croly's spectacled eyes.

"Foolish boy!" the detective exclaimed, after a moment of silence. "I have learned more than I expected, and at present I shall not request you to add to my information upon this point. I ask you to inform me concerning the hiding-place of George Dyer, however. Do you know whither he went after your interview of night before last?"

"I do not," Blain huskily replied.

"The truth, remember, for I shall detect a falsehood."

"On my life, I swear it!"

"That will do, unless you have seen him since?"

"I have not."

"Then you may go. But let me warn you not to make a bad matter worse by hasty action. If your

father is involved in this crime it is bad enough for you. And I more than half suspect that he is."

Clarence Blain unlocked the door without a word, and entered the mansion.

Croly turned away, but was amazed to see a tall, shadowy form leaning against one of the pillars. It was the Hindoo detective.

Croly bent his head forward, a scornful smile curling his thin lips.

"So this is your style of beating a rival—stealing his points while he does his work?" he exclaimed, a fine scorn in his tones.

Hyjah's impassive countenance did not change its expression as he met the other's gaze.

"You are mistaken, Mr. Croly," was his calmly uttered reply.

"Do you deny that you came back to listen?"

"I certainly deny it."

"Then please explain your purpose. You must have overheard our interview whether you intended to do so or not. So the result is the same."

"I overheard only a few remarks, and those were of no importance, Mr. Croly. The fact is, I had pumped the young man pretty dry before you began. I think I got nearly all the points he had to give that were worth listening to. Of course, you and I both know that Julian Blain is not to be suspected."

Hyjah spoke with such quiet conviction that Croly was again nonplused. Was the Hindoo really so far ahead of him in this case? The younger detective realized that he must work hard to win his spurs in this race of skill.

"Why did you return, then?" Croly quietly asked.

"To satisfy your curiosity upon a point which troubles you."

"What is that?"

"You just asked Blain about George Dyer's hiding-place. As you are a young man, your interest in that direction is pardonable, and I am willing to satisfy it. If you will follow me now I will guarantee to bring you face to face with George Dyer himself."

Croly, after a moment's hesitation, said, in an incredulous tone:

"I shall hold you to your promise, sir. Come, let us lose no time."

The rival detectives hastened away from the mansion side by side.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE STRUGGLE ON THE BRIDGE.

"That detective is awfully smart, and no mistake —regular nonpareil, he is, from A to Z!"

Steve Lawton was trudging along the busy street as he made this soliloquy, heedless of the sights and sounds to which he was so accustomed, yet too alert to permit the most trivial incident to escape his keen, restless eyes.

It was toward the close of the day marked by the action recorded in the preceding chapter.

The boy had no special object in view at the moment. He had, however, started forth with a determination to do something brilliant.

"I loafed around yesterday, and didn't do nothin', and if I loaf to-day without strikin' a leader of some sort, that smart detective will take me for a ninny —sort of dead matter that's no good any more."

The boy paused at a corner which he reached at the moment of making this observation, and glanced alertly about him. Almost at the same moment he saw a large man, with a slouching figure, glance furtively toward him from the opposite side of the street.

The glance was but momentary, and was so hastily withdrawn that it was evident it was not intended to attract the boy's attention.

But in this intention the man failed. Steve was as wide awake as a weasel. And he was as sly as he was observant. Without appearing to have seen the slouching figure at all, the lad sauntered over to a peanut-stand, which was attended by a pug-nosed youngster somewhat older than himself.

"How's trade, Johnny?" Steve familiarly asked.

"Nuthin' extra, Steve. How's yourn?"

"I'm out of a job."

"Get bounced?"

"Naw. Bounced myself, as it were."

"How's that? Thought you was publishin' a newspaper instead of peddlin' 'em as yer used to do."

Johnny's speech contained a commingling of sarcasms and eager interest. He and Steve had once been chums. Hence the older boy entertained a degree of envy toward the other when the latter was picked up by Mr. Waldron and made an apprentice in the great printing-house.

"The business got too monotonous for me, so I took to the street again," said Steve, carelessly. All the while he kept an eye on the slouching figure upon the other side of the street.

"Guess you didn't suit t'other man when the chap that picked yer up was shot, eh?" Johnny shrewdly observed.

"I suited well 'nough. But he didn't suit me. That's how it stood. And when it come to me or Mr. Blain gittin' out of the business, I thought that on the whole I'd better be the one. Make less talk, yer know. Don't wanter sell out yer stand here, do yer?"

"What yer give?"

"Dollar seventy-five."

"Oh, you go eat yerself! Think yer can git stock and good will of a mercantile 'stablishment at that figger? Guess not, Steve."

"Glad you didn't take me up, 'cause I don't like the peanut business anyway. More 'propriate for old women and one-legged soldiers than 'tis for a young fellow like me. Good-by, Johnny; I must be goin'."

Steve dodged an apple which the other in his wrath flung spitefully at him, but succeeded in catching the fruit before it rolled into the gutter, and sauntered down the street, coolly eating it.

While Steve was enjoying the discomfiture of the other boy, he had not been idle in his capacity of detective. He had seen the slouching figure on the other side of the street saunter past, quickening his pace as he increased the distance between himself and the boy.

"Wants to keep out of my sight, that's certain," was Steve's mental comment.

The latter's good-humored badgering of Johnny evidently quieted the stranger's suspicions, for the man turned his back full upon the boy, and strode along the street as though in haste to reach his destination.

The street was near the New York approach to the Brooklyn Bridge, and it speedily became evident that the man intended to cross.

"If he's goin' over, so am I," Steve decided, following at a safe distance behind.

The man did not take a car to cross the bridge, as the boy had expected, but kept to the promenade instead.

"I can't lose him now, that's certain," he commented, and waited until the slouching figure had passed well from view.

Steve groped in his pocket for a penny for toll. As he did so a look of consternation came over his face, for there was not a coin of any denomination upon his person, and he had no other money.

A treacherous hole in his pocket explained his situation. He had started out with money enough for present needs, and now he found himself unable to pay the one-cent toll required.

"Pretty go, if I must lose that chap jest 'cause I ain't got a cent!" he exclaimed.

But he was at a loss only for a moment. A swift glance about him, and he espied a portly, good-natured looking gentleman sauntering past. He was plainly a stranger in the city, bent upon crossing the bridge for the magnificent view which it affords.

Steve stepped up to him, and clutched his arm.

"Beg pardon, mister," he said, by way of accosting him.

"What is it, my lad?" the gentleman asked.

"Got any pennies to spare? I want to pay my toll, and haven't a red to my name. Hole in my pocket, yer see."

The man took out three or four pennies, but hesitated as he was about to proffer them to the boy.

"If I give pennies to everybody that asks me I shall have enough to do," he exclaimed, adding: "I've just paid toll for one man; I must draw the line somewhere."

And he coolly returned the pennies to his pocket.

He would have walked on, had the youngster not clung tenaciously to his arm.

"Did you pay for that slouching chap?" Steve eagerly asked.

"Yes."

"He asked yer to?"

"Yes."

"What else did he say?"

"That he had lost all his money, and that he must cross over to see his sick mother."

"Did you swaller that yarn?"

"Just the same as I swallow yours, sonny. So trudge along."

The man flung off the boy's grasp impatiently, and hastened on.

Steve watched him disappear from view with a mischievous grin, and a moment later advanced, paid his toll with a bright new copper, and then trudged on his way in pursuit of the slouching stranger.

"My hand is small, and the old duffer's pocket was big, so it wasn't so very hard to borrow a cent, after all. I'll give it back if I ever see him again. I ain't no pickpocket, but I must have a penny when so much depends on it," Steve remarked, with a chuckle.

As yet he had seen nothing of the man of whom he was in pursuit on tho bridge. He hastened forward lest he should lose him, after all.

Still the stranger did not appear, and at length the lad halted and looked backward.

"He's given me the slip after all," he exclaimed.

"No he hasn't; he's right here!" exclaimed a gruff voice so close at hand that the lad sprang backward with a startled ejaculation.

He found himself face to face with the slouching figure which he had been pursuing; and before he could recoil beyond his reach, the stranger had seized the boy's arm with no gentle hand.

"Bill Leary!" Steve exclaimed, recognizing the coarse face of the ruffian.

"And you was playin' watch-dog at my heels!" the man growled, in return.

Steve realized upon the instant that the man had fathomed his purpose. He perceived also that there was no one near on whom he could call for assistance should he require any. A bevy of girls were strolling past them, chatting and laughing. An old gentleman stood near the rail, gazing out upon the panorama spread upon the river. Farther away were other pedestrians, but, as luck would have it, all were women or children.

The lad took in the situation at a single glance. Then he turned his eyes up to the fierce face of his enemy.

"Let me go!" he exclaimed.

'Tell me what you was doggin' me for, then?" the ruffian fiercely retorted.

"Haven't I jest as good a right to cross this bridge as you have?"

"You've no right to watch me."

"Yer don't know as I was watchin' yer, mister."

"Don't I know it? Guess I don't keep my eyes shut all the time, my fine youngster. Now, look here. Who sent you to shadow me—hey?"

"Nobody."

"The truth—who sent ye?"

"I said nobody did. If you think yer can make me say anything different, jest try it, that's all I've got to say."

The ruffian cast a furtive glance about him. Never was that section of the bridge more deserted than at that moment. Everything seemed to favor the ruffian's brutal purpose.

"You're too crusty by half, my sharp lad," he exclaimed, tightening his grip upon the boy's arm.

"Let go of me!"

The boy struggled with all his might against that powerful clasp.

Of course his assailant was far too powerful for him to cope with successfully, by means of physical strength alone. But weight and muscle cannot al-

ways overcome a determined will, when that will has an active brain behind it.

Steve writhed and wriggled with so much agility that for a minute the man had all he could manage.

Then, when he felt that he could resist no longer, he gave utterance to a loud, prolonged cry.

The instant that the cry passed his lips he ceased struggling, and with a low moan of pain sank as though lifeless at the ruffian's feet.

In the fading light the lad's face assumed an almost ghastly hue, while his lips and cheek were smeared with blood.

Leary instantly relaxed his grasp, and allowed the lad to lie as he had fallen, at the same time glancing hastily about to see if he was observed. He saw a man running toward him; and without waiting to see whether it was an officer or citizen, the ruffian darted away, and ran as for dear life toward the Brooklyn side of the bridge.

The man, who was a bridge policeman, did not attempt to pursue the ruffian. Instead he hastened to the side of the boy, who was in the act of rising to his feet.

"What's the rumpus?—did he try to kill you, boy?" the officer demanded, catching sight of the lad's blood-smeared features.

Steve Lawton uttered no response. He eluded the outstretched hand of the patrolman, and the next instant was running like the wind in pursuit of Bill Leary, the "tough."

CHAPTER XXII.

STELLA'S TRIAL.

It was indeed George Dyer, the missing foreman of Blain & Waldron's printing-house, who stood in the door-way of the lonely hut, face to face with Stella Brandon and Katie Byrnes.

It was no wonder they uttered expressions of mutual amazement as they recognized each other.

The young man gazed in silence into the beautiful face of the vagabond's daughter for a full minute. Then he lowered his lantern, and stepped under the rude shelter.

"I'm not going to run away from you, Stella," he declared, something like an expression of relief in his tones.

"Why should you flee from any one, George?" she demanded, stepping backward, and eying him suspiciously.

"That is not easy to explain," he replied. And after a moment's pause he added: "Were you running away, too?"

"Yes."

"From whom?"

"The detectives."

"You don't mean to say, Stella, that they suspect you of anything wrong?"

"I do not know what they suspect. But they are trying to take me—as a witness, perhaps. They suspect some one else."

"Whom?"

She looked straight into the young man's eyes as she answered:

"You can guess as well as I can tell you."

"Your father, I suppose—Carl Brandon."

"Of course. He is suspected of everything evil. And yet he never wronged any one."

"Perhaps they may be right, Stella. Carl Brandon has a bad temper, you know."

"He is innocent, George Dyer, and you know it."

"I know it?"

"Yes, you. You know who shot Hiram Waldron. I—I—half believe you committed the crime."

The young man's face flushed to a livid hue, and he once more raised the lantern so as to throw the light full upon the girl's countenance.

"I can prove your accusation to be false—so far as I am implicated, at least," he said, his voice husky with suppressed passion. "But I will admit that I know who fired the fatal shot. And if you wish, I can tell you the culprit's name."

He said this so unwaveringly that it sent a sharp, deathly pain to the girl's heart.

She knew that George Dyer was not believed to be guilty of the murder. She knew that he was believed to have been a witness of the tragedy. Therefore, if her father was, even in appearance, a party to the affair, the foreman had the power of giving him over to the authorities.

Not that Stella for a moment really suspected her father of guilt. There was an intrinsic nobility in his character which, in her eyes, placed him above the shadow of deliberate criminality. Yet, underneath all her confidence, struggling against her love, her convictions, the power of her own will, was a half-defined, yet haunting suspicion—a shadowy horror that she had not dared even mutely to shape in words.

Carl Brandon did, in truth, possess an impetuous disposition. He felt keenly the sting of injustice which had been shown him by the firm, from the membership of which he had been "crowded out," because of his irregular habits. Despite these circumstances, nothing could have tempted him, in his right mind, to commit the cold-blooded crime that caused the city to ring with indignation.

So far the vagabond was above suspicion.

But there was another possibility—a dreadful, lurking possibility, which could have no existence except in the case of a man with dissipated habits.

Carl Brandon was often intoxicated. Not unfrequently all his native dignity was clouded by this

fatal weakness. And at such times he was not always fully conscious of his own acts, although he would apparently be comparatively sober. He had committed many petty offenses, while in that condition, at various times. And upon each of those occasions he afterward retained not the slightest recollection of his own action.

If this were possible in lighter offenses, was it not likewise so in the case of the Waldron tragedy?

Stella did not like to think for even a moment of this dreadful possibility. Yet it would obtrude upon her mind in spite of all her efforts to banish it.

And now, with the words of George Dyer ringing in her ears, the horrifying suspicion became stronger, and for a moment overwhelmed all her courageous confidence, which, until then, had been unyielding.

For an instant she stood weak and trembling under the unwavering gaze of the young man.

Then her resolution returned, reinforced by a realization of a new necessity.

Perhaps her father did commit the crime. In a drunken frenzy he might have shot Hiram Waldron, and upon recovery of his senses no recollection of the act lingered in his mind.

With compressed lips Stella accepted the possibility, and with electrical rapidity she decided what to do.

Whether innocent or unconsciously guilty, her vagabond father must be defended. And, friendless and an outcast, who but herself could defend him?

Braced by this thought, the brave girl resolutely met the gaze of the foreman.

"If I desire it, you can tell me the culprit's name?" she repeated, in a low, clear tone.

"That is what I said," he replied.

"If you know who shot Hiram Waldron, why do you shield the guilty man?"

Dyer hesitated, and then answered:

"Can you not imagine?"

"I cannot."

"You know what I have told you many times—that I love you, and that I would spare you any pain that I could at whatever cost to myself."

The young man spoke earnestly, yet a flash of resentment from the girl's eyes showed that she distrusted him.

"I do not believe you," she slowly said.

"Do not believe that I care for you?"

"I do not believe you would make so great a sacrifice for me or for any one, except yourself."

"You do me injustice."

"Then the punishment will be mine in the end."

"I would shield your father for your sake."

"This is not what I wish you to tell me, George Dyer. You say that you saw the shot fired that killed Hiram Waldron?"

"I did."

"And, therefore, you can tell the name of the culprit?"

"Yes."

"Then do so."

The young man stared at the speaker in amazement. Then he glanced toward Katie Byrnes, who had not uttered a word.

"Do you wish me to tell in her presence?" indicating the Irish girl by a nod.

"Yes, in her presence—she is more to be trusted than you are!" was the steady reply.

The young man uttered something like a smothered oath. He stretched out one hand, and rudely seized Stella's arm.

"You will goad me too far!" he cried.

"I wish to goad you to telling the truth—that is all. I do not believe my father committed the Waldron murder. If he did, and you know it, I wish you to tell me. Is it worse for me to know than to fear the worst? I have a right to know. Look into my eyes, George Dyer, and tell me the truth. Now, now!"

She had torn her arm free from his grasp, and now clutched his in turn. Her face was very pale, her eyes glowed, she trembled violently.

He recoiled before her, his eyes fell, and in a low, dogged tone he said:

"I shall not tell you. You would not believe me if I did, so it is useless for you to ask me further."

She pushed him quickly from her, impetuously crying:

"Then you do not know."

"I do know."

"Why do you refuse to tell?"

"Because I dare not disclose the truth."

"You dare not?"

"Yes."

"Then you are a coward. That is why you fled as soon as the authorities began to investigate the mystery—because you were a coward."

"You do not understand, Stella. I am in a terrible situation, and in which it is not easy to say what is duty. If you would only be more friendly I would tell you all, and act upon your advice, for you are interested as well as I, you may be sure of that."

"I can tell you what to do. If the one implicated is near and dear to you, shield him, though that may not be the highest form of duty. But the public is so blood-thirsty that it does not always do a criminal justice. So I would shield one whom I loved at any cost. But, otherwise, expose the miscreant. That is your duty."

"You are braver than I."

"I trust I am."

"I have half a mind to confide in you, Stella."

"If the secret is yours I should not keep it."

"I say it is yours also."

"Then tell me, as I have urged you to do."

The young man hesitated, glancing furtively out into the darkness that so densely surrounded the hut.

Then he bent toward the girl and quickly exclaimed:

"Listen, Stella—I will tell you all I know concerning the printing-house tragedy."

Stella Brandon could not wholly restrain the eagerness which she felt to hear the revelation, for she instinctively felt that the young man really intended making her his confidante. His weak, wavering nature had yielded to hers, which was so strong and resolute.

"Katie, stand back—what he has to say is for my

ears first. Afterward I may confide in you," she exclaimed.

Her faithful friend complied with the request. At the same time Dyer stepped nearer the outcast's daughter.

"It is a short story that I have to tell," he began, speaking scarcely above a whisper. "But it requires a little preliminary explanation. Upon the morning of the tragedy, soon after my arrival at the printing-house, I saw your father enter the counting-room. This was before you visited Mr. Waldron, upon the same morning, which I also observed. Then, as I——"

George Dyer's eyes, which had until this moment been fixed steadfastly upon the face of his beautiful listener, now looked past her toward the entrance of the hut.

At the same time they became suddenly distended with terror; his jaw fell nervelessly; his countenance assumed a sickly, ashen hue.

At the same instant a tall shadow appeared outlined against the dingy walls.

CHAPTER XXIII.

CROLY USES HIS SKILL.

The Hindoo detective had promised to lead Croly, his more youthful but no less determined rival, to the hiding-place of George Dyer.

Mr. Croly was skeptical, yet sufficiently curious to follow him.

They hastened to the building upon the same street upon which the printing-house stood. Most of the buildings upon that section of the street were old, and this one was no exception.

Three other buildings stood between it and the scene of the tragedy, and these were devoted to various kinds of business, some of the floors being occupied as offices and a few tenements.

The door by which the Hindoo entered admitted them to a sales-room, through which they passed unchallenged, descending a flight of stairs, after which they found themselves in a dimly lighted room, stored with bales and boxes.

Here the Hindoo paused, and said:

"Let it be distinctly understood that you are not to take advantage of this opportunity to arrest or interview George Dyer. Do you agree?"

"You have my word for it," Croly replied.

"Yet, in due time, if you wish to return to this place alone for the purpose of taking him, you are at liberty to do so."

"I will bear that in mind."

"But at present you are only to look into his face to make sure of his identity. You are not to speak to him. He will not speak to you."

"Very well. Let us lose no time."

Hyjah led the way along a passage-way lined with stacks of bales and boxes, and they soon came to a door with glass panels.

Beyond this door was a small bare room, lighted by a single gas jet. The light was sufficient to reveal with perfect distinctness the figure of a man seated upon a rickety chair reading a morning newspaper.

Hyjah stepped forward, and tapped lightly upon the glass with his forefinger.

The man sprang to his feet, flung down the paper, and advanced toward the door.

"Now, look," said the Hindoo detective to his rival.

Croly stepped to the front, and found himself face to face with George Dyer, the foreman.

The young man evidently recognized the detective at a glance, for he recoiled slightly, his countenance assuming a death-like pallor.

But he did not attempt to flee. Instead he stood motionless as a statue, gazing squarely into the eyes of Croly.

He did not open his lips; his hands hung at his sides, his fingers worked nervously, it could be seen that he trembled violently.

For a full minute Croly gazed into Dyer's face, to make sure there could be no mistake. He had met the foreman several times before the day of the tragedy, and was perfectly familiar with his features, and likewise with the many little motions and gestures which are as useful as faces for the identification of individuals. Dyer bore the scrutiny as though it were a disagreeable ordeal which he could not escape.

At last, when Croly turned away, the young man gave an audible sigh of relief.

"Are you satisfied, Mr. Croly?" Hyjah asked.

"I am satisfied."

"Then we will go."

"Wait; one question."

"Go ahead."

"George Dyer is here for me to look at by your orders?"

"That is no secret, so I admit it."

"Very well; we will go."

They returned to the street. There, before parting, Hyjah said:

"I will favor you with still further explanation, as it may be of use to you and no injury to my chances of success. I have met and talked with George Dyer, and he has given to me the name of the person who shot Hiram Waldron. I forced him to make the statement, yet I do not feel sure it is correct. In fact, I am convinced that it is not, and that I am no nearer proving the culprit's guilt than in the beginning."

"You think, then, that Dyer is mistaken?"

"I did not say that."

"You are evidently following out a definite theory."

"I am following the slender thread of a clew which you overlooked in your investigation. Slender as it is, however, I believe that it will defeat the sophistry in which you place so much confidence."

The spectacled eyes of Croly met those of the Hindoo with penetrating keenness, while a slight flush tinged his smooth, pale cheeks.

"To what sophistry do you refer?" he quickly asked.

"That of the lines on no two human thumbs being exactly alike, upon which your jealously guarded clew is based."

Croly was astonished to discover that Hyjah had fathomed his secret. He supposed that his theory and the strange clew were known to no man save himself.

"I hope you have not been spying upon me?" he exclaimed.

"Not at all."

"Then how did you know?"

"How? I had my eyes open, that is all. I saw that a piece had been cut from the window sash in the counting-room where the murder took place. I knew that no one but a wide-awake detective would do such a thing. I have also heard of the theory about the lines on human thumbs. I confess that I never tested it, because I did not think it worth while."

"You consider it worthless, then?"

"I do."

"And consequently have no fear of me as a rival?"

"You are very sharp, and if you had anything like a reasonable clew to work on I should have my hands full to get ahead of you. You will learn not to put confidence in sophistries."

Croly smiled, and quietly answered:

"Perhaps I shall. But you must not believe me too gullible. I do not swallow everything that doesn't happen to be a whale. I'm much obliged to you for your caution, and I respect your skill even more than you think; still I shall try and swing my end of this case till somebody wins. If you come out ahead we'll shake hands. If I am the winner——"

"We will shake hands the same," said Hyjah, as Croly hesitated.

Thus they parted.

Croly, the detective, hastened to the printing-house and entered the counting-room, which was open.

He found Mr. Blain there before him, looking pale and haggard.

After exchanging salutations, Mr. Blain said:

"I hope you are making progress upon the case, Mr. Croly?"

"Oh, yes," was the ready reply.

"Do you suspect any person of the crime?"

"I do."

"May I ask whom?"

"I would rather not speak names at this stage of my investigations. But I will allow you to infer what you please from that which I am about to say. I desire you to assist me in an experiment, and also to answer a few questions."

"Go on, sir. I am ready to do all in my power to aid you."

"Have you lately met the vagabond, Carl Brandon?"

"Yes, many times."

"Then you are perfectly familiar with his personal appearance and peculiarities?"

"Yes."

"Did you ever notice his hands particularly?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Has one finger upon his right hand been amputated at the first joint?"

"Yes, the forefinger."

"And are his hands rather narrow and long?"

"They are."

Croly stepped to the window by which it was supposed that the murderer of Mr. Waldron escaped, and seemed to examine the sash closely. His own person was between Blain and the window, and the thing which he deftly accomplished was not observed by the other.

Returning to the gentleman, he said:

"Brandon is a taller man than yourself, is he not?'

"Yes, by a couple of inches."

Croly seized several quires of blank printing paper, which lay in a chair, and placed it upon the floor under the window.

"Please step upon that, sir," he requested.

Mr. Blain complied.

"Now you stand about as high as Carl Brandon, were he in the same position?" the detective inquired.

"I should say I did."

"Now, please, raise the window-sash. Do it as though you were in haste. Wait! I wish to stand back so I can see you."

Mr. Blain complied. But he found it difficult to do so, because he was too tall to grasp the sash to advantage.

When the window was raised, Croly said:

"That is right; thank you. I now see just how the act was done, and it is a great help where one must work out a clew almost wholly from imagination. You may step down now, and I will close the window."

Mr. Blain did so, and Croly quickly approached the window, scrutinized it closely, and then closed the sash.

"What do you make out of it?" Blain questioned,

intensely interested in the singular investigations of the detective.

"I make a great deal out of it."

"Does the experiment confirm a suspicion?"

"I cannot tell at present."

"Do you suspect Carl Brandon of committing this crime?"

"I must decline to say."

"I do not think he would commit so heartless a crime, Mr. Croly, unless——"

"Unless—what?"

"He was crazed with liquor."

"Does he ever reach a stage of intoxication resembling insanity?"

"I have known him to do so."

"Does he afterward recollect what has taken place when he recovers his senses?"

"He does not, when in that condition."

"This is a marked peculiarity of Brandon's fits of intoxication, is it?"

"Yes, sir."

"You speak from your own observation, Mr. Blain? It is important that I obtain evidence of that sort upon unimpeachable authority."

"I speak concerning Carl Brandon only from my own experience with him. I have known him for many years. I have known and pitied him."

"Very well—that will do. I must now pursue my investigations in another quarter."

Out upon the street went the detective, and hastened to a spot where he could not be observed.

Then from his pocket he drew a piece of wax, upon one side of which was an impression of the window-sash just where the piece had been cut. On the other side was the impression, perfect in every line, of Julian Blain's thumb.

"He little thought how important a clew he was furnishing me while I distracted his attention with questions and details for which I didn't care a picayune," Croly muttered, as he examined his prize.

"It is perfect," he added, a moment later. "And now I will compare it with the bloody print that the

Hindoo scoffs at. We'll see whether the murderer of Hiram Waldron falls under his thumb or mine."

The detective hastened to his own private quarters. But he did not reach them far in advance of the dwarfish being known as Spider, whom he had once before encountered under such peculiar circumstances.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE SHADOW OF A CONSPIRACY.

Croly, the detective, having arrived at his private room, seated himself at the table where so many unique curiosities and criminal clews were collected.

Then he produced the wax impression of Julian Blain's thumb, which he had obtained in such a clever manner.

This impression he placed upon a small tablet of gray marble; and by its side he deposited the piece of window sash which bore the bloody print of the murderer's thumb.

For several minutes he looked at them carefully. As he did so his face flushed with excitement, and he bent over them with eager interest.

The impressions were exactly alike in size and shape. So much was distinguishable at a glance. And it was also plain that the lines were similar, if not the same in detail.

Exactness in this particular could not be attained by a superficial or hasty examination. They must be compared line by line through a microscope.

Before proceeding to do this, the detective took from a drawer another wax impression, and placed it upon the marble tablet beside the others. This was of his own thumb, taken long ago, and used many times before in comparison with others.

Between this and the other impressions there was but slight difference as to the size or contour. But the naked eye revealed a marked variation in the lines—so marked that even an unscientific eye must detect the difference.

"They're not all alike, so much is certain," Croly

said, in a low voice. "It remains to be proven whether they are all unlike. And to test the reliability of this clew, I must pit it against the marvelous skill of Hyjah, the Hindoo. For that he is the most skillful detective living, I have not a doubt. If I win in this case—and I have scarce a hope of doing so—I shall still declare that the Hindoo is the shrewdest officer in the world. Mysteries simply dissolve under his efforts. He can seem to see through walls, read men's thoughts—do all those things which we know to be impossible to a human being. Yet he has only natural powers, matured and perfected by training. I am young and love my profession. Should I succeed in this case, and he fail, then it will show that he is not infallible, and that there is hope of my becoming his equal. Time will tell."

Croly's wonderful eyes glowed behind his spectacles with the fire of ambitious resolve. He looked then as invincible as the Hindoo himself. The truth was, in his modesty, he underrated his own natural powers. which, in the mysterious case which he was now working out against a great rival, were being developed with marvelous rapidity.

He next took from its case a large microscope, the lenses of which were of great power. Still he hesitated, as though fearing that a further examination might dissolve all his hopes of making a successful solution of the great mystery.

As he at length adjusted the microscope, and bent over the clew to complete his examination, a violent clangor of his office bell interrupted him.

He hastily placed the impressions in a drawer, and then went to the door.

A message-boy handed him a local message envelope, and said:

"Fifteen cents, mister."

Croly tore open the envelope before paying, and read the following:

"Come to No. — Baxter street at once. Very important.

"(Signed) SIEVE LAWTON."

It was not in Steve's handwriting of course; in fact, he could not have written it at all. But it was, without doubt, written at the dispatch office at which it was dated.

"No reply," Croly said, audibly, giving the boy his money.

He hastened to the Twenty-third street station of the Third avenue Elevated Road, and took the first train, which soon landed him at Grand street. And thence he had not far to go to reach the place designated in Steve Lawton's message.

He was impatient at the interruption, for he had been on the eve of settling his doubts in relation to the clew which he had been at so much pains to procure. Yet he dared not delay a response to the telegram, for fear that his boy assistant was in serious difficulty of some kind.

Reaching the number in question, he walked past it once, furtively scanning the premises.

It was one of the many dingy brick buildings which mark the locality, and there was nothing in its appearance to distinguish it from a score of others.

Croly had not been very long in the city; yet, like a true detective, he had posted himself concerning the locality and exact character of all dangerous and questionable localities. And, although there were many disreputable places in that vicinity, this dingy brick building was not in Croly's list as such.

He went boldly to the entrance, and, without ringing the bell, tried to open the door. To his surprise it was not locked, but opened readily, and he found himself in a narrow hall-way and confronted by an uncarpeted staircase.

Before he could pursue his investigations further, a side door was burst violently open, and he was confronted by one of the most powerful men he had ever encountered.

The man's complexion was dark as that of a mulatto; his eyes were small and bright, and like black beads; his arms were bare, disclosing their notted muscles and cords. His size, fierceness of aspect, and great muscular powers rendered this man a

most formidable one in all respects, and Croly involuntarily took a backward step.

"Hah!" ejaculated the stranger, in a hoarse, threatening tone.

The detective coolly surveyed him from head to foot. Then, in exact mimicry of the ruffian, he exclaimed:

"Hah!"

The ruffian's face flamed with anger, and he clenched his great hands as though he would crush his adversary at a single grip.

"Who're you?" the man growled.

"That's my affair," was the retort, in a tone so exactly imitating that of the other, that the ruffian stared in consternation. But for the difference in the words uttered, one might have mistaken the retort for an echo.

"Don't you mock me!" he roared.

"Then don't try to scare me."

"What yer here for, eh?'

"What are you here for?"

"I live here."

"Well, so do I."

"What do yer mean?"

"I mean that I live here as much as you do."

"Do you say this isn't my home?"

"I say just that."

"Then I lie, do I?"

"It appears that you do."

"Then you say that to my teeth?"

"No—to your ears. You don't hear through your teeth, do you?"

The big ruffian evidently preferred blustering to fighting, but the slender detective's irritating retorts were more than the big fellow could withstand.

He stepped toward Croly and sent out a blow which seemingly would have felled an ox.

It would have felled Croly had it hit him. But it did not. He adroitly eluded it, and before the man had recovered from the momentum of his effort, he received a sharp blow from the small, clenched hand of the detective that sent him reeling against the outer door.

"Jehu!" he gasped, glaring at his cool adversary, as though he would devour him.

"Better luck next time—try again!" Croly retorted.

The man edged his way around to the other side of the hall-way. Divining treachery, the detective determined to forestall any further attempt his foe might make.

Watching his chance, Croly suddenly sprang upon the giant, clutching the latter by the throat, and pressing him forcibly against the wall.

The ruffian was strong and heavy, but he possessed neither agility nor skill. His opponent pressed him so closely that he had no time to wield his ponderous fists in self-defense, save in impotent wrath with blows against the air. On the other hand, the fingers that pressed his own hairy throat threatened to entirely shut off his breath.

In vain he writhed and kicked, and even this poor satisfaction was presently denied him by a threat that he dared not ignore.

The cool muzzle of a revolver pressed his forehead, and the voice of Croly, the detective, exclaimed:

"Stand quiet!"

The ruffian instantly obeyed, an ashen pallor overspreading his dark face.

"Don't kill me!" he gasped.

"Why not?"

"I—I was foolin'."

"Oh, that's it? Then I'll give you a chance to live—a small one. You began this picnic, and I'm going to end it. Now don't you stir hand or foot, if you care to eat another dinner. Do you mind what I say?"

"I was in fun, I say."

"Yes, yes, so am I. You have had your fun, though, and now I will take mine. Now tell me who gave you orders to attack me in this way?"

"I—thought you were a burglar——"

"No, you didn't. You thought I was a sort of sleepy detective that you had caught napping—a big blunder, as you see. I'm a detective, but I

wasn't napping. That is the difference. Who told you to lay me out?"

"I did it on my own hook."

"You didn't do it at all, that I can perceive. But somebody hired you to try—gave you ten dollars probably."

The man stared in consternation.

"Who told you that?" he asked.

"Nobody, only I took you for one of those ten-dollar chaps. Now, who hired you?"

"I don't know who it was."

"How did the man look?"

"I didn't see him."

"Whom did you see?"

"A little, wicked-looking wretch known as Spider."

Croly was instantly interested. He had encountered this stange being once before, under peculiar circumstances, as the reader will remember. The reader will also remember that Spider had declared that he was paid the sum of five dollars to lead the detective off the track. Croly had purchased the bill which Spider had produced in support of his declaration, and expected to trace it to the one who had given it to the strange being.

While he had used but little time in tracing the bill, he had met with success, although of an unexpected character. The bank-note had been given to Spider by Carl Brandon, the fugitive and vagabond. So much was certain. And thus what promised to be a useful clew amounted to naught.

The detective, in crisp, eager tones, said:

"Spider gave you ten dollars to entrap me, did he?"

"Yes."

"What did he wish you to do with me?"

"Detain you here till he——"

The man abruptly interrupted himself, and shut his lips in a way that seemed to declare: "I have said too much already."

Croly pressed the muzzle of the revolver yet more tightly against the man's temple, and said:

"You must finish that sentence, my man, and in just one minute's time. Now, speak!"

CHAPTER XXV.

A THRILLING SITUATION.

The big ruffian realized that the imprudent slip of his tongue had rendered further secrecy impossible.

He must tell this determined detective something —either the truth or so clever a falsehood that the other would not suspect it to be such.

"Unload the whole business, my man, or it will go hard with you," said Croly, as the man hesitated, cudgeling his brain for a plausible explanation of the remark which he had inadvertently made.

"Spider knew you were coming here, and he wanted me to keep you busy till he could——"

"Could what?"

"Hide."

"That won't do—too thin altogether," exclaimed the detective, so sharply that the ruffian regretted upon the instant the attempt to shield his employer further.

Croly continued:

"I see I shall have to shoot you, not fatally, but enough to stir up your conscience. There is no other way by which I can get you to speak the truth."

The detective made a movement as though he really meditated carrying out his threat. The result was magical.

The burly ruffian flung up both hands, and cried:

"Mercy, mercy! Don't shoot!"

"You shall receive no mercy at my hands if you try to deceive me in so much as a word. Out with the truth, and the whole of it."

The man eagerly exclaimed:

"I will tell you all. Spider wanted me to keep you here while he stole something of yours."

"While he stole something?"

"That's what he said, boss."

"What did he wish to steal?"

"Something you got for a clew to a murder mystery, a bloody mark, or something of that sort, he said. That is all I know about it, boss."

The effect of this declaration upon Croly was startling.

His muscular hands suddenly clutched the ruffian with greater force, and before the latter could make any show of resistance, he was hurled violently to the floor.

Then, without waiting for the man to regain his feet, Croly flung open the outer door, and dashed out upon the street.

In an almost incredibly brief space of time the detective had reached his private apartments.

The instant he passed inside the door he knew that some one had been there in his absence.

A hasty examination confirmed his apprehensions.

The bloody thumb-print—that singular clew upon which he had based his hopes of winning the case against his great rival—was gone.

Not only this, but the wax impression which he had obtained that morning, also. There were missing, besides these, several trinkets, of less value and importance.

"This is the work of that dwarfish wretch called Spider," Croly exclaimed, the moment that he had ascertained to a certainty the fact of his having been robbed.

He promptly returned to his outer room and rang a sharp summons.

A pale, astute-looking girl answered his ring, and stood upon the threshold with an air of quiet deference.

"Minnie, whom did you admit in my absence?" he sternly demanded.

"No one, sir," was the low reply.

"Are you sure, girl?"

"I always obey my orders, sir."

"Has no one visited my rooms to-day except myself?"

"Nobody but the boy, sir."

"What boy?"

"The one you told me to send up if he called."

"Steve Lawton?"

"Yes, sir."

"I have not seen him."

"He called, and I sent him up stairs, sir."

"At what time?"

"Directly after you came in, some two hours since."

"How long after I came in?"

"Not three minutes, sir."

"He did not come to my room, at any rate. So there is a mistake somewhere, Minnie. How did the boy appear?"

"He was small, and very queer in his ways, with a head like a ball, and odd, sharp eyes——"

"Spider!" Croly interrupted, adding, sharply: "You committed a great blunder in admitting that fellow. Did he say he was Steve Lawton?"

"Yes, sir; and asked to see you. And you remember you told me to send him up if he called for you when you were here. I don't see that I am entirely to blame, sir."

"I shall not blame you at all; so don't be alarmed. This boy, or whatever he may be called, did not come to my room while I was there. Instead he hid somewhere near until I went out, and then got into my room and took some articles of great value. So in future we must be more vigilant. Now, tell me when Spider went out?"

"Only a few minutes ago, sir."

"During my absence?"

"I did not know you had been out."

"Which way did he go?"

"Toward Third avenue."

"To take the elevated road, of course. He is of the sort that likes rapid transit at such a time. Now, I have something to do to follow him, for I shall do nothing until my clew is recovered. While I am gone, Minnie, do not admit any one, not even if he pretends to be the President of the United States. You will mind what I tell you, Minnie?"

"Yes, sir."

To an ordinary person it would have seemed an

impossible undertaking to trace the shrewd being who had taken such hasty flight.

It in reality required time and patience. Yet Croly accomplished the task with such methodical accuracy that before the hour of nine that evening he had "spotted" the exact place where Spider had taken refuge. The spot was one of the most notoriously lawless in the city—a resort for thieves and house-breakers at all times; and often sought as a place of refuge by criminals of the most desperate description hiding from the police.

Why such resorts as these are not entirely broken up by the authorities it is not easy to explain. That they do exist, however, is a fact which any person familiar with the byways of the great metropolis can attest.

Croly realized that the most perilous part of his undertaking was before him.

The case was one that required such delicate handling that he dared not call on the police for assistance. There was but one man in the city whom he would have trusted to aid him in this matter. That one was the Hindoo detective, his rival.

Of course, he did not for an instant think of calling upon him for assistance.

"I win alone, and against him, or I do not win at all," Croly declared, in an undertone, as he approached the dilapidated old rookery in which he believed Spider to have sought refuge.

This building, or rather cluster of buildings, were little better than a heap of brick and mortar seemingly tottering on their foundations.

They were separated near the middle by a covered court, which was dark and filthy beyond description.

Croly stealthily entered this court, passed along its entire length, and presently found himself in a square open court beyond. In the center of this space a large pole had been erected for the support of several telephone and telegraph wires, for which the crumbling bricks of the buildings had been found insecure.

A hasty survey of the premises showed the detec-

tive a way by which he could reach a projection of one of the roofs, and thus gain an entrance to the ruins, which it would not be easy to do by way of a door or lower window.

This plan, which was hastily formed, he did not proceed at once to carry into effect. He first carefully reconnoitered the premises, peering into each dark corner to make sure that no person lurked there to spy upon his movements.

In poking among some rubbish the detective was rewarded by seeing a crouching, shapeless mass of rags move clumsily, then sit erect in the form of a man.

Croly instantly seized the ragged figure by the shoulders, and held him so that he could not raise to his feet, should he try to do so.

"Wha—what yer want?" drawled the man, his speech and manner unmistakably betraying his condition.

"I want you to keep still, that is all."

"Ain't I still 'nough, I'd like to know?"

"Not if you talk as loud as that."

"Where am I, anyhow? An' who the dickens 're you? Guess you're—you're off yer base, eh?"

The man was hopelessly intoxicated, so much was clear. The speech, tone, clumsiness, all could not be so perfectly feigned.

Of so much Croly felt sure. But something in the hapless creature's voice, caused him to linger. Where had he heard that voice before? Surely, at a time and place differing widely from this, if at all.

The detective had his pocket-lantern with him, but he dared not use it then, for fear that watchful eyes might see the tiny rays of light, and curiosity be excited.

While he was debating the question, the man leaned against his arm and began breathing heavily, indicating that he had again fallen into a drunken stupor or sleep.

"I must leave him until I finish my investigations in this quarter," he decided.

He dragged the unconscious man to a more obscure corner, that he might be less likely to be dis-

turbed. Then he returned to the court, and for a moment listened intently.

All was quiet in the vicinity. A few lights gleamed dully from several windows; the tramp of many feet upon the sidewalk beyond was faintly audible. These were the only signs of life in the locality.

Croly proceeded to fasten spurs upon the heels of his boots to assist him in climbing; then, once more making sure that he was not under surveillance, he began ascending the telegraph pole.

This was not the first time that he had performed a similar feat. To so practiced an athlete it was not at all difficult, nor in itself dangerous.

He had nearly reached the projecting roof of the nearest building when he was thrilled by the sound of voices directly below.

He instantly ceased climbing, and remained as motionless as though glued to the pole.

It was now so dark in the court that not an object was visible.

Still the voices sounded low, gruff, and distinct; and straining every sense, the detective caught a single query and its response from the unseen persons.

The first speaker asked:

"Can you see where to strike?"

And the other replied:

"Plainly enough."

Before the significance of the remark could otherwise fully present itself to the listening detective, it was impressed upon him in a most startling and unexpected manner.

A slight, whirring sound, and then—thwack!

Something had struck the base of the telephone pole with terrific force. The blow was swiftly followed by another, and another, until the detective felt his support totter away, and then descend with terrific force.

CHAPTER XXVI.

WHAT THE SPY DETECTIVE ACCOMPLISHED.

Steve Lawton had been to too much trouble and risk in following Bill Leary, the "tough," to give up his game at the last without one more attempt.

His pretended swoon had thrown the ruffian off his guard. Then the appearance of the policeman had put Leary to flight, and thus left the boy free.

Had the latter paused to make a full explanation to the officer nothing could have been done. So he made no explanations at all.

The young typo-detective's desire was to discover the destination and errand of the man he was following, and until that end was accomplished Steve would not settle down and simply let the police protect him.

"The city is real good to pay the cops wages to look after young chaps like me, and all that," the youngster mentally observed, as he fled from the astonished officer. "But," he added, "I ain't goin' to impose on their kindness while I've got such a lively pair of legs. It's too awful mean. Hullo! there's the chap I'm after now!"

The boy had in truth once more come within sight of the ruffian. He was striding along at a furious pace, turning neither to the right nor left, and Steve followed at a safe distance, making sure that his foe should not obtain a glimpse of him.

Both pursuer and pursued soon reached the Brooklyn terminus of the bridge, and the latter made his way almost directly to, and entered a billiard saloon on Fulton street near Hicks.

Steve reconnoitered the premises before venturing to enter. As he sauntered past, a young fellow, whose countenance was impressed by a premature knowledge of the world's ways, came to the door to obtain a whiff of fresh air.

"You 'tend the tables inside?" Steve carelessly asked, confronting the youth.

"When anybody's playin'. Business's quiet to-day, though," the latter replied.

He was smoking a very strong pipe, with a nonchalance that indicated that he had graduated from mild cigars a long while ago.

"That feller that just went in—does he play much?"

"Never saw him but once or twice. No, he don't play."

"What's he doing?"

"Drinking whisky, I guess. That's what I heard him call for."

"Pay for it?"

"He'll have to, or get bounced."

"Guess he'll be bounced, then. Couldn't pay toll on the Bridge little while ago."

"You know him?"

"A little."

"Tough, isn't he?"

"Oh, I ain't going to look out for you fellers if you can't look out for yourselves. Only I didn't s'pose you was quite so fresh."

With this ambiguous observation Steve made as though he would walk off, but the pool-tender's curiosity was excited, and he detained the boy with a show of eagerness.

"What do you know about that chap?" he demanded.

"Nothin' much."

"See here, if he is playin' any trick on us, and you know it, just blow on the racket, or we'll make it go hard with you."

"Don't try to be too smart, now, 'cause I don't scare at a little smoke. And 'nother thing: you may take yer hand off o' me, or you'll catch somethin' you won't like."

The young typo said this with such a cool, though determined air, that the other changed his tactics very abruptly.

"See here, just tell us all about it, and we'll do what's right by you," he said, persuasively.

"I don't ask no pay. But yer mustn't try to drive me, 'cause I'm nonpareil double-leaded, when yer git me mad. I'll tell yer one thing, don't bounce the tough. I guess he came here to meet somebody, and I guess a fly-cop is spyin' him. Mixed up in a crime of some sort. He 'bout broke my back once, when he had an ugly spell—that's why I'm interested, and if a fly-cop comes in to pull him, I want to be 'round and see the picnic."

"This is important, to be sure," declared the other, adding: "I must go in and tell the boss."

"Wait a minute."

"What do you want?"

"Can't you manage somehow to hide me inside where I can see what is going on without the tough's seeing me. I'll look out for myself, you needn't have any fears on that score."

"I'll try it. Come in now."

"No; come back and tell me if he is out of sight. He'd chew me up if he got his eyes on me and s'pected I was spyin'."

The young fellow entered the billiard and pool-room, and was absent several moments. When he returned his face glowed with eager interest.

"The tough has got a partner, I guess," he announced, adding: "There is another fellow here, rather odd-looking, who took the tough into a side room of ours that we keep for people that like a quiet game of cards and don't want spectators. They are buzzing each other at a great rate. It was as you said about the tough having no money. The other fellow paid his bill."

Steve could scarce restrain his eagerness within proper bounds.

"Other chap is a fly-cop instead of a partner," he declared. Of coure he knew better, but he did not wish the pool-room proprietors to suspect that he was playing the detective part.

"You're a pretty sharp boy, I should say. Come in, and I'll see that you have a chance to watch the detective and his game, if that is what they turn out to be."

Steve was conducted into the pool-room and up

some stairs, terminating over the card-room in which Bill Leary and the stranger were closeted.

The place in which he found himself was a narrow, open space, stored with odds and ends from the saloon below. The small apartment underneath was visible through a circular register. At present this was closed, but Steve Lawton opened it so softly that the persons underneath were not aware of it.

The pool-tender was obliged to return to his duties, several players having entered at the moment and begun a game.

So the young typo-detective was left entirely to himself.

The first words that came to his ears were uttered in the gruff tones of Bill Leary, who said:

"I've got about through with this business. I want you to pay me off and let me go."

"Impossible—not yet," replied a low, harsh voice, unmistakably disguised.

"D'ye expect me to hang around here till I'm nabbed?"

"I expect you to finish what you have begun. I will pay you all the money you need; but I won't dismiss you till your work is done."

"S'posen I say I'm goin' to quit any way?"

"Then you will change your decision, that is all. You must not think that you have me in your power and can wind me round your finger as you please. You are as deep in the mud as I am in the mire, and I've got one advantage that you have not—ready money. If you back down you will find yourself in an awful scrape. I can take care of myself. Do you see the point?"

"That's why you're keeping me short of money, is it?"

"That is one reason. Another is, that I wish you to keep sober. To speak plainly, your head isn't level enough to stand much whisky."

Leary growled out an incoherent response, and then relapsed into silence.

Steve Lawton, it is needless to say, was intensely interested in this interview, which certainly indi-

cated that criminal relations existed between the ruffian and his unknown companion.

Steve could only obtain an indistinct glimpse of the two men. The stranger was very cleverly disguised. Yet the boy was impressed by a certain familiarity in gesture and speech that convinced him that he had seen this person before.

"Who the duse is it?" the lad asked himself. "Not George Dyer—too stout. But that may be bogus. He's well made up, anyhow. Who can he be? I'm blessed if I can guess."

At that moment the stranger spoke again.

"You have agreed to see this thing through for five hundred dollars. Now I'm willing to double that figure if you will push it through without loss of time. What do you say?"

"A thousand!" exclaimed Leary, springing to his feet.

"I've said it Now, speak up."

"What more do you want of me?"

"I want you to make sure of one of two things. Either go to work and prove Carl Brandon guilty, so that the detective will look no further; else that Hindoo detective and Croly, his rival, who are more to be feared than fifty others, must be effectually disposed of."

"Expect me to murder them two chaps for a thousan'? Guess not. Careless business trying to beat them. Cost you more'n that. A little rap with a slung-shot or a thirty-two cartridge don't drop that sort of game. I can fetch 'em, like enough, but it'll cost ye a big price."

The stranger was silent a moment, and then said:

"Name your price."

"Five thousan' and costs."

"Too high."

"Then find 'nother man, and pay me off."

"No, you must do it. You can command a score of desperate assistants, and you shall have your price. What is your verdict?"

"It's a go."

"Then be about it."

"Not so fast; I want your help, with Croly at

least. You must decoy him, as I shall direct. He is a reg'lar lion,and you have to handle him careful. I'll tell you how we'll manage him."

Leary proceeded to lay before the other an elaborate scheme, every word of which was distinctly overheard by the boy detective.

In the conversation that ensued the twain used a more cautious tone. Once, however, the stranger, becoming unusually excited, sprang erect and spoke up in a sharp,clear tone.

The effect upon Steve Lawton was magical.

He rose to his feet, his young face pale with the intensity of his agitation, and without waiting to hear more, he stole softly down the stairs and hastened out upon the street.

Reaching the open air, he quickly crossed the street, walked down Fulton street, turned the corner of Front, and, when out of sight of the billiard-room, paused to collect his excited thoughts.

"That voice!" he exclaimed, half aloud. "By ginger! I know him now—I know him! And he is the one that shot Mr. Waldron, or else—but I can't figure it all out in a minute. I guess I'll have to let Croly do the figuring. But I've got the idea anyhow, and if it don't clear up this awful affair, then I don't know a Hoe cylinder from a type-writer. To think that I should hit upon this piece of evidence! And that ain't all—it clears up that other business that I overheard in the printin'-house t'other night. This—but hold on. Am I goin' to stand here like a Quaker and let 'em slaughter Mr. Croly and the Hindoo detective? I guess not."

And away the youngster ran, almost wild with the weight of responsibility pressing upon him.

He thought of laying the whole case before the police; but Croly had charged him not to do that. A dozen plans struggled in his brain, and nightfall found him hastening toward Corlear's Hook.

Straight toward this most dangerous locality he went, alone and upon an errand of greatest moment.

Before he had reached his destination he became conscious of a startling fact.

A man was following him, so swiftly and silently

that he realized there was no escaping an encounter with him. Hence, with compressed lips and determined countenance, he paused and waited for his pursuer to overtake him.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE HINDOO GAINS A POINT.

Stella Brandon, startled by the expression of horror upon the face of George Dyer, turned quickly to see what he beheld to agitate him so intensely.

Her own dismay was scarcely less than his when she saw the tall figure of the Hindoo detective standing in the door-way of the hut.

She would have fled if there had been a possibility of doing so. But there was not. Hyjah blocked the only means of egress from the hut, and to elude him was out of the question.

He took a step forward, and spoke in a kindly tone:

"You look at me as though I were some monster that you expected would devour you!" he remarked, a slight smile curling his firm lips.

Stella was first to find voice to respond. There was no use of attempting to escape; and something in the great detective's face and speech reassured her rather than increased her apprehensions.

"What do you wish, sir?" she asked, in a firm tone.

"I wish to do you no harm. I would protect you if you would accept my protection," was the reply.

"We do not need protection, sir."

"You did need it a short time ago."

"I do not understand."

"When you were coming up from the railway station, and that ruffian attacked you."

"Then it was you who came to our assistance?"

"I chanced to be at hand, and I gave the fellow a sound lesson. Then I came on to see that you fell into no more serious trouble."

"Did you allow the ruffian to go?"

"Yes, after chastising him. It suited my purpose

better to do so. Now I find I am in time to save you from further annoyance and imposition."

The dark eyes of Hyjah rested upon the face of George Dyer as he said this, and the young man's glance fell, while he shrank away from the detective as though in mortal terror.

The Hindoo detective continued:

"This brave young man loves you so well, Miss Brandon, that he is willing to inflict the deepest anguish upon you in the hope of winning your affection in return. A very brave young man! Shall I allow him to proceed with the infamous falsehood which he had just begun pouring into your ears? Or shall I treat him as he deserves?"

George Dyer trembled violently as he listened to the sharp denunciation of the detective. But his face flushed with anger and he stepped threateningly toward the Hindoo.

"Have a care what you say, sir!" he exclaimed, his voice husky with rage.

Hyjah did not stir. But he quietly retorted:

"It would be well, young man, if you were a little more cautious. It may be to your advantage not to be too crusty with me. I charge you with falsehood and cowardice. Do you deny the justice of the charge?"

"I certainly deny it."

"Were you telling this young lady the truth just now?"

"I should have done so had you not interrupted."

"No, you would not. You had begun with a lie, and others were on your lips. So don't repeat them to me, for I shall not submit. You know that Carl Brandon did not shoot Mr. Waldron, or instigate the crime, or even have any knowledge of it beyond that which he may suspect. You know who committed the crime. You are willfully concealing it, and are, therefore, in the sight of the law, a partner in guilt. Therefore I am going to take you in charge."

"No, no! Mercy!" gasped the young foreman, recoiling in dismay.

"Oh, yes. Although I am not going to arrest you,

I must take you in charge—place you where you can be found when you are needed. I don't expect you to confess to me at present, for you have a powerful motive for concealing the crime, else you would not have fled. But you must yield to my control. I will take good care of you—won't even let the other detectives get hold of you. What do you say?"

"I shall not yield."

"Is that your decision?"

"It is."

"Let us see."

Hyjah strode forward with outstretched hands. The young man whipped out a revolver and quickly raised it. But, quick as was the movement, he was too late. The weapon was sent spinning from his hands; he received a sharp rap upon the cheek that caused him to stagger against the side of the hut; and almost at the same instant he was caught by the shoulder, whirled violently around, thrown upon his back, and his wrists were confined with handcuffs.

Thus, within the period of twenty seconds, he was reduced from a condition of bold defiance to one of helpless captivity.

"I never endure anything of that sort from so young a man," Hyjah quietly declared, standing over his conquered adversary.

He turned to Stella and her warm-hearted companion, and continued:

"You had lost your way, it appears?"

"It was my blunder, to be sure," said Katie Byrnes, ready to take the blame.

"You were going to the house of a friend up in the village?" the detective pursued.

"Yes, sir."

"Allow me to show you the way. It is not safe for you to remain here unprotected.'

Stella hesitated. She thought of her father, whom she believed to be hiding not far away. And she thought, too, of the warning which she had received not to trust the detectives.

Yet she could not wholly distrust this kind, strong man; and at the same time her mind reverted to

another detective who had befriended her once, and promised to stand by her at all times. Could it be that Croly, that handsome, brave, kind-voiced man, would prove treacherous.

Hyjah, watching her countenance, seemed to read her thoughts; for, before she could respond to his inquiry, he said:

"If you have fled from the city for your father's protection, you have made a mistake. The best thing you can do is to return at once. Carl Brandon has gone back to his old haunts, and is in as great danger as ever."

"Has he returned? Do not deceive me, sir!" Stella exclaimed, all her solicitude for her father's safety aroused.

"I would not deceive you, my poor girl. It is my mission in life to aid, not inflict pain upon the unfortunate."

"I believe you, sir. I will not distrust you. And I wish you would tell me if Mr. Croly, that cool, handsome detective, is also trustworthy?"

"Mr. Croly is a gentleman, and, although we are rivals upon this case, I can speak of him only in the highest terms. He would stand by you as faithfully as a brother could do."

The vagabond's daughter covered her face with her hands, and for several moments did not speak or move. As she stood thus a soft hand touched her cheek, and the sweet voice of Katie Byrnes said, close to her ear:

"I believe we made a big mistake in running away from Mr. Croly and the Hindoo detective. They both seem to be kind men. Let's trust them, and if they're mean enough to betray us to our enemies, I believe they will be punished some day as they deserve."

Stella quickly lifted her face, and impulsively exclaimed:

"Yes, we will go with you. Take us back to the city, and advise us what to do."

"You shall not regret your decision," Hyjah quietly declared, and he led the way forth from the hut, in which they had so strangely met, leading his prisoner by the arm.

They returned to the village railway-station, and were in time for an early train back to the city.

Stella and Katie proceeded first to the home of the latter. Hyjah took Dyer to a hiding-place where he could keep him in safety until such time as his testimony would be required.

There were many officers on the young man's track, and Dyer was glad to be under the protection of the Hindoo, at whose hands he would receive more lenient treatment than he would otherwise have done.

Hence he remained almost voluntarily in the place of refuge provided for him by the detective; and it was in this place that Hyjah showed him to Croly, greatly to the latter's amazement.

The Hindoo detective promised to return to Stella in the evening, and, if possible, inform her of the present whereabouts of her father. But evening came, and Hyjah did not appear.

As the hour grew late and the detective did not fulfill his promise, Stella became more and more alarmed.

"He has either fallen into difficulty or has proved treacherous," the poor girl said to her faithful friend.

"I don't believe he would break his word if he could help it," was the warm response, for Katie's confidence in the Hindoo was as strong as it was sudden.

"Then I fear my father is in trouble. I cannot bear the suspense longer. I must go to the places which he frequents, as I have done many times before, and do what I can for his safety. Are you afraid to go with me, Katie?"

"Sure, and I'm not afraid where you dare go."

"Then let us hasten."

The twain went out upon the street, and in a short time reached the vicinity of a saloon which Carl Brandon, while under the influence of liquor, often visited.

The place itself was of a better class than most of those in that locality. The proprietor was a sallow-faced man, who, for a wonder, was perfectly tem-

perate himself, and possessed many kindly characteristics.

There was a side entrance to the place with which Stella was familiar, and the brave girl made her way directly to it. As it chanced, she met the proprietor face to face just within this door.

"My father, Mr. Ridley—is he here?" she questioned.

"He has just gone," was the reply. And in response to the mute appeal of her countenance, he kindly added: "He was not very badly off, though not quite sober. But I think he can take care of himself. He said he was going to Blankley's. I wouldn't fret about him, Stella."

She did not wait to hear his last remark.

"Come, we must find him," she said to her companion, and they hastened along the dingy streets, coming at last to a locality which they knew to be one of the most lawless in the city. As they neared a certain point they heard a shout from the opposite side of the street, and saw a man running as though for his life. "It is my father!" Stella gasped.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

SURROUNDED.

Down came the telephone pole with a crash in the obscure court—a crash that awakened momentary curiosity in the few who heard it, perhaps, but not sufficient to impel them to investigate. The two ruffians, one of whom held the ax with which he had chopped down the pole, rushed toward the other end of it, expecting to find the man who had climbed to its summit mangled and dead on the flagstones.

One of the men flashed a ray of light from a lantern upon the scene. There lay the pole, with broken insulators and a fragment of wire. But this was all. No mangled body; no sign of the one they sought to destroy, either living or dead.

"We have missed him after all," whispered the man with the ax.

"It can't be. He must be here, somewhere. Come this way," said the other, in a subdued tone.

But a thorough search of the place met with the same result.

Croly, the detective, whom they had sought to kill, had escaped.

Let us see how it happened.

The instant that he felt sure the telephone pole was falling, he flung himself forward with all the power and agility he possessed. He was barely able to seize the edge of the jutting roof; and to this he clung, while the pole fell with a clatter to the ground.

For a minute he hung suspended, his body swinging like a pendulum over the abyss. He could hear the whispered exclamations of his enemies; he saw the light from the lantern flashing upon the dingy buildings, and reflected for an instant from the ax carried by one of the ruffians.

He paused to see no more. There was no time to be lost if he hoped to succeed in his purpose. He realized that his enemies were combining forces against him, and that he must be doubly alert and resolute if he was to overcome them.

An agile spring, and he was upon the jutting roof, and beyond any possible ray from his enemies' lantern. And, without stopping to see what they would do next, he found his way to a skylight, which was open. He did not hesitate to drop down through the opening.

The room in which he found himself was small and dark, save for a dim light that came in through a transom.

Passing out into a narrow passage, he was brought to a halt by the sound of footsteps.

They came from a room near at hand. He went to the door, and prepared to listen, when the knob turned with a jerk, and the door was opened so suddenly that it struck against the detective's arm before he could withdraw.

It was a dwarfish figure that crossed the threshold and confronted Croly—the figure of the shrewd, malicious being known as Spider.

The latter uttered a startled cry, recoiled, and attempted to close the door again. But a firmly planted foot prevented, and a strong hand seized the door, and flung it back with a force that hurled Spider almost into the detective's arms.

Before the terrified dwarf could recover himself he was held firmly by the throat—so firmly that he seemed threatened with instant strangulation.

"Don't kill me! Mercy!" gasped the wretch.

Even as the words passed his lips Spider found himself hurled to the floor, while a pair of handcuffs were snapped upon his wrists.

Then he was jerked to his feet again, and for the first time the detective spoke.

"This time I am going to make sure of you, and I will not lose any time about it either. I will give you just one minute in which to produce the articles which you took from my room to-day. At the end of that minute, unless you place the things in my hand, I'll trot you around to the police headquarters, and have you held for murder. That's what I will do."

Spider trembled like an aspen, his face growing pale as ashes.

"I—I ain't murdered nobody," he began, but was sharply interrupted with:

"Time! One minute, remember."

And Croly produced his watch, and fixed his gaze upon its face.

"Wait, wait—I can't get them so quick," chattered the dwarf.

"Yes, you can, for they're right in this room, as you know. Start your boots—I mean business."

Spider dared not put the detective off with further pretext.

So he hastily entered the room from which he had just emerged, closely followed by Croly. He opened a drawer in an old-fashioned bureau—the drawer was not locked, and he managed it in spite of the manacles upon his wrists—and took therefrom a square pasteboard box.

"Here's the things, mister, just as I found them," he declared, as Croly took the box from his hands.

The detective glanced into the box, saw that everything was as he had left it, and then thrust it into an inner pocket.

Then he turned to the dwarf, and said, in a voice full of terrible sternness:

"Now you must tell me all you know about the murder of Hiram Waldron. All, remember."

"I know nothing about it, sir."

"Perhaps not. But you know who hired you to steal these clews from me."

"The man was disguised, so I didn't know who he was."

"Was he short or tall?"

"Rather tall."

"How much did he pay you?"

"A heap of money."

"How much?"

"Twenty-five dollars."

"What did he say he wished you to steal from me?"

"The thumb-prints that you had—one in blood and two others in wax."

"How did he know I had them?"

"Somebody saw them, and told him."

"You told him, didn't you? You were the spy. Now, own up."

"I was, mister. Oh, I'm pretty sharp."

"Did he tell you to decoy me to the house where I was attacked by that overgrown coward?"

"He did."

"Can you tell me anything more about this affair?"

"I can't, sir."

"Then I'll leave you, for I have plenty to do. But first I will make sure that you do not spy upon me any more for an hour or two."

The detective proceeded, in spite of the dwarf's appeals for mercy, to gag him, and bind his ankles together, and then lock him into the small room.

Without further ado, Croly made his way cautiously from the building.

Reaching the dark court where he had come so near meeting his death, he paused to listen intently before going farther.

The space seemed wholly deserted.

Then he bethought himself of the intoxicated stranger whom he had taken so much pains to place in a safe retreat.

He groped his way to the spot, and in another moment had found the unfortunate wretch just as he had left him.

To arouse the stranger from his stupor was no easy matter, but he at length succeeded in doing so, and the man, sitting erect, exclaimed, in his drawling accents:

"How—how are ye? Time to get up, eh?"

"It is time for you to reform, my man," Croly returned, adding: "Let me have a look at you."

As he spoke he produced his tiny pocket-lantern and turned its rays upon the face and figure of the inebriate.

A low ejaculation of amazement broke from his lips. The man before him was young and handsome. There was refinement impressed upon the delicate lines of his face. But his clothes were coarse and in tatters, to say nothing of the filth which had accumulated upon them.

"Clarence Blain—and in rags!" Croly exclaimed.

The tone and words of the detective seemed to partially arouse the young man from his befogged condition. At the same time he recognized Croly; and with a glance at his own ragged attire he staggered to his feet.

"By Jupiter!" he exclaimed. Then, after a bewildered pause, "Where am I?"

"In Kepley's Court, near Corlear's Hook."

"I should say I was. Where's my clothes? I didn't have these rags on when—when—but I don't know when. What time is it?"

"Eleven o'clock."

"Why have you hold of me? You're Croly, the detective."

"I found you lying in the filth of this alley, and I am trying to take care of you. Did you have on better clothes earlier to-day? These are pretty coarse, aside from the tatters."

"Course I had on better ones. Guess I'd give my

tailor a picnic if he rigged me up in this style, by Jupiter!"

Clarence passed his hand over his eyes, and then, in a graver tone, continued:

"I must have been pretty badly off. They have not only robbed me of my money and watch, but they even exchanged clothes with me. Heavens, who had these things on last? What shall I do?"

"Go home and clean up. But for me you might have been killed. Stay; what do you recollect last before you lost consciousness? Where were you?"

"In Colville's wine shop, I believe."

"Who was with you?"

"A young chap I picked up—a jolly fellow with eye-glasses and plenty of money. He got me drunk, and—good heaven! Did I dream it? Or did he ask me some questions about—about——"

"The Waldron murder, eh?" Croly questioned, concealing his eagerness.

"It seems as though he did. I didn't mean to get full—I didn't dare to. But he was a mighty persuasive chap. Did he question me, or did I dream it all?"

"Probably he questioned you, as you fear. That jolly fellow with eye-glasses was a detective—one of the score at work upon this case. The best thing that you can do is to tell me all that you think you told him. You cannot cover a crime forever. Be a man, and tell all."

"No, no." The young man glanced nervously about him, and rapidly added: "Take me out of this place—set me right again. I will pay you well for this favor. You are a gentleman, Mr. Croly—I'll say that for you."

The detective realized that, in his weak state, Clarence Blain could doubtless be compelled to disclose the message which George Dyer had given him to take to his father. But Croly, with all his zeal, preferred not to resort to such means.

To force an intoxicated man to criminate another looked too much like treachery, and Croly was the soul of honor.

"Come, and I will take you home," the detective

said, so kindly that the young man, in his weakness, seized his arm, and clung to it in child-like confidence.

"Take me home," he repeated, in tremulous tones. And arm in arm they started to leave the place.

But they had not taken three steps before they heard the rapid tramp of heavy feet in their rear, and Croly, on the alert for danger, turned quickly, and found that they were literally surrounded by ruffians.

Clubs and knives were brandished on all sides, and a hoarse voice exclaimed:

"Drop him! make sure of him! Now is your time!"

The agile detective for once in his life, found himself in a situation from which his own agility, strength, or wit could not extricate him.

He struck out right and left. But the next instant his arms were clutched from behind, and furious blows rained upon his head and shoulders.

CHAPTER XXIX.

"UNDER HIS THUMB."

Croly was not to be easily overpowered, even by fearful odds. Two of his assailants went down under his vigorous blows, before their attack had begun to tell upon him. But when he was seized by a half dozen strong hands he could only writhe and kick under the fierce blows rained upon him.

In that moment he felt that fate was against him—that with all his skill and prowess he was now to be overpowered and killed by a pack of brutal ruffians hired to do the work.

Clarence Blain, although making a feeble show of defending the detective, was quickly thrust aside, and Croly was alone with his foes.

A struggle like this could not long be maintained.

The detective grew dizzy and faint under the attack; he felt that he was falling—that he could resist no longer.

But at that moment he heard a shout from some

person near. At the same time the hand which held him let go, and he realized that he once more had the power of defending himself.

Regaining his feet, he saw another figure in the midst of the fray—a man who seemed to recklessly attack the entire crowd of ruffians, heedless of their blows in return.

A light flared from a near window at the moment, and caused the scene to appear with startling distinctness. And in this light the face of Croly's defender was revealed—and it was the face of Carl Brandon, the vagabond.

In that moment Croly realized that he owed his life to this man; for only the outcast's fierce onslaught diverted the attack of the ruffians from the detective to himself.

But the combat was not yet ended. The court seemed literally to swarm with men. And the respite given Croly was only of brief duration.

He was again assailed upon all sides. In the semi-darkness he dared not use a revolver for fear of hitting Brandon or Clarence Blain.

He once more found himself being overpowered, when he was again electrified by a shout.

This time the cry was in a boy's voice, and a familiar one at that. This was not all; he understood the youngster's words, shouted at the top of his voice.

"Here we come, nonpariel double-leaded wid a box of quads throwed in," was the lad's announcement, and with all the heedlessness of youth he rushed into the midst of the fray. His temerity was rewarded by a blow that sent him to the ground half stunned, and temporarily silenced.

But there were others with him who did not go down so easily. A half dozen policemen, whom Steve had secured at the nearest station, dashed in among the "toughs" with their clubs; and within a less period than is required by us to chronicle the fact, the combat was ended, with three ruffians lying bruised and bleeding upon the flagstones, and five more sullen and helpless with manacled wrists. Among the latter was a tall, slouching ruffian with

small, bleary eyes, and a scar on his left cheek, long hair and black, bristling beard. Bill Leary, the "tough."

"What shall we do with them, Mr. Croly?" asked one of the policemen, when the detective had recovered sufficiently to give an account of the affray.

"Lock them up on a charge of assault with intent to kill," was the grim reply.

At the same time the detective stepped up to Bill Leary and sternly said:

"Hold out our hand."

"What for?" the man growled.

"Because I tell you to."

"I guess I won't."

But his refusal was without avail. Croly seized the ruffian's right hand, held it tightly for a moment, and then released it. The policemen looked on in astonishment. Leary was as bewildered as they. Nor did Croly vouchsafe an explanation to any of them at the time.

Steve Lawton had recovered from the blow which he had received, and stood beside the detective. His keen eyes had seen what the latter had done, and understood his purpose. Croly had another wax impression, this time of the thumb upon Bill Leary's right hand.

The policemen hastened away with their prisoners, leaving only Croly, Steve, and Clarence Blain in the court. Carl Brandon, the vagabond, had disappeared.

"I wish he had stayed, for I would like to show him that I appreciate his efforts in my behalf. A strange man, surely. Once I thought he tried to kill me; now he has saved my life, at risk of his own."

Croly said this as they went from the court. For Steve he had words of warmest praise also—praise that caused the boy's heart to swell with pride.

"I like to be talked to that way better'n bein' knocked 'round and cuffed as I used to be on the street," was the youngster's mental comment.

At the street corner they separated, Clarence Blain being now sufficiently sober to make his way home alone. Croly instructed Steve to come to his private

apartments in good season the next morning; then the boy detective went to his own lodgings. Croly had scarcely left his boy assistant out of sight, when he was once more startled by cries and the sound of hurrying feet from a point near at hand.

Hastening to the spot, he saw two policemen clinging to a prisoner, while near them stood two girls, one of whom threatened the officers with a leveled revolver.

He recognized each member of the group upon the instant. The prisoner was Carl Brandon; the one defending him Stella; and her companion, Katie Byrnes, the faithful Irish girl.

Croly stepped into their midst, and sternly demanded:

"What is the meaning of this?"

"We have got the murderer of Hiram Waldron, that is all. Ahead of you scientific detectives, you see," replied one of the policemen.

"He is innocent! You shall not take him away!" cried Stella, her dark eyes flashing with resolute zeal.

Croly turned to the officer, and in a low, quiet tone said:

"Release this man. He just saved my life, as I can easily prove. He is no more a murderer than I am. Let him go, and I will be responsible for his appearance should he be needed. And to-morrow I will let you pull in the real culprit."

The policemen knew Croly too well to doubt his statement. They thought he might be misled by wild-cat clews; but they were aware that he was a man of his word.

"If you will be responsible we'll take our chances, that is all. We have orders to give in to the detectives every time, so I suppose we have got to do so," said the policeman.

After some parleying the officer released Brandon and walked away.

"This is no time for thanks," said Croly, as both the vagabond and his daughter seized his hand and began to pour out their gratitude. And the detective added, in his gentlest tone: "I owe this man

more than he owes me, for he saved my life. He would not be convicted had he been tried for the crime with which he is suspected, because he is innocent, and we detectives do not allow innocent men to suffer for the guilt of others. Another time we will talk the matter over. But to-night I wish you all to go to your homes and await to-morrow's developments."

For a few moments they lingered, eagerly discussing the exciting events of the past hour. For it was thus that the incidents culminated with which Stella, her companion, and Steve Lawton were concerned when we left them at the close of chapters twenty-six and seven. Then they separated, Stella to think and dream of the cool, handsome detective, and Croly to make a final test of his clew—that strange clew in which no one but himself possessed any confidence.

The test was made; and one of the impressions in wax was identical in every line with the thumb-print in blood. The others differed. The test was careful and elaborate. Now all that remained was to prove that the clew implicated the guilty man.

It was a little after nine o'clock of the next morning when Croly sauntered up to the elegant residence of Mr. Blain. The latter had gone to the counting-room, and Croly, in no apparent haste, followed him thither. He was in his private office, and, pushing the office-boy aside, Croly made his way to that room which he had visited several times before.

He flung open the door; was confronted by Julian Blain, and the latter, with a show of anger, demanded:

"Did the office-boy tell you I was here?"

"No; I discovered your presence in another way," was the calm reply.

The detective closed the door, and quietly placed his back against it. Then he continued:

"I bring important news, and I thought you would waive formalities in your natural interest."

"What news?" Blain asked, sinking back upon his chair.

"I have solved the mystery of the printing-house

murder. I know who shot your partner. I know beyond the shadow of a doubt."

The other sprang to his feet, his face deathly white, his limbs trembling under his weight.

"You—you are not sure?" he huskily asked.

"Perfectly sure."

"Is it—is it Brandon?"

"No, it is not Brandon."

"Dyer, then—the foreman."

"Nor Dyer, the foreman. The one who fired the shot is safely lodged by the police. But he is not the one who is alone responsible. He is a mere tool, like the weapon that he used. His name is Bill Leary, and he is known as 'the tough.' I went down to see him this morning, and showed him how I had got his case down fine, and he told me the rest—just what I suspected before. Oh, I wouldn't draw any pistols, if I were in your place. Better wait and hire somebody else to do the shooting. But you must go with me, all the same, and answer to the charge of causing the murder of your partner, Hiram Waldron."

Croly sprang forward as he ceased speaking, and caught the upraised weapon in time to prevent its being discharged.

At the same time the door again opened, and two policemen entered, followed almost immediately by Hyjah, the Hindoo detective.

The latter stepped up to Croly, and said, in a low, earnest tone:

"You have won, and I congratulate you. I was on my way hither upon the same errand that brought you, when I saw you enter, and foresaw your purpose. We both solved the mystery, but you were a few minutes ahead of me. I probed the business affairs of Julian Blain, and found that he had been swamping the firm through private speculations, and that Mr. Waldron, upon the night before the tragedy, had discovered the condition of affairs. Blain has cheated, lied, and embezzled. Threatened with exposure, in a whirl of desperation he gave Bill Leary a large sum of money to commit the crime. Blain was in the front part of the counting-room

when the shot was fired, and escaped by throwing the window open and jumping out. The assassin immediately followed—and I presume it was his thumb, wet with his victim's blood, that left the clew which you have so successfully worked out. Leary entered the next building, in which a window was also open, as you remember. George Dyer was an unseen witness of the crime, and this morning he made a full confession to me. It was he who shouted, 'Waldron has killed himself.' He did so upon an impulse to shield his employer. And later, he dared not reveal what he knew, because, being a confidant of Blain's fraudulent speculations, he had accepted bribes, and was in danger of being implicated as an accomplice all through. Dyer escaped by a secret passage under the printing-house; and I discovered this passage, and drove him to seek refuge elsewhere."

Hyjah made these statements rapidly and in a low tone, while the officers and a physican resuscitated Blain, who had fallen, apparently, in a fit upon realizing that there was no escape.

* * * * * * *

Another great New York criminal mystery solved, and the culprit brought to jusice. For Julian Blain, despite the vigilance of his guards, succeeded in putting an end to his own life before the case came to trial. Of Bill Leary's fate we will not speak, because it is our province to entertain, not to shock, the reader.

"Spider" was not caught, and he is still at large, although the little wretch deserves severe punishment if any one ever did. George Dyer had no specific charge made against him, and so got off by merely being branded as a coward.

Hyjah, the Hindoo, had been beaten, in time if not in skill. The rivalry had been warm, the result strangely close. But more friendly or generous rivals than these two great detectives never lived. Both were brave, skillful, and honorable; yet they were as unlike in their methods as two members of the same great calling well could be.

Clarence Blain, sobered by the terrible tragedy which made him the son of a murderer and suicide, has changed his habits—has become, in fact, a staid, honorable gentleman. He took up the wreck of his father's business and worked it up to prosperity again; and two or three years later he took Carl Brandon into partnership. The vagabond was a vagabond no longer, he having promptly reformed after the revelation of the mystery regarding the terrible crime in which he came so near being implicated. His beautiful daughter's influence; and, perhaps, more than these influences, the sustaining friendship and watchfulness of Croly, the detective, brought him up from the abyss, and he is in a measure fulfilling the promise of his younger manhood. As manager of the printing-house none could be more skillful than he. Brandon & Blain is the title by which the firm is now styled.

Carl Brandon, a year later, made his home with his daughter and her husband; for—queer that we have not hinted it before—Stella, the brave, beautiful child of the dissipated outcast, became what she was just fitted to be—the wife of the detective. Mrs. Croly is her name. Her admiration for his skill and bravery had resulted as such things usually do.

Steve Lawton came in for a share of glory in the solution of the case, for, in the interview between Leary and the disguised person, which he overheard, as stated in chapter twenty-six, he had recognized the voice of the unknown as that of Julian Blain. Thus, although he would not have known how to work out the case alone, he really solved the mystery to his own satisfaction unaided.

The boy returned to work in the printing-house, and thoroughly learned the trade like a sensible lad. But he was afterward frequently called upon to assist Croly upon difficult cases, and always sustained the reputation which he had gained so early in his career.

Only one point remains unexplained, and that was brought out in the trial of Bill Leary.

Stella Brandon's pistol, which was the weapon

used in the crime, was stolen from a police-station by Spider. It will be remembered that a policeman took it from Carl Brandon, previous to the tragedy, and that he had not seen it afterward.

Spider had long been in the employ of Julian Blain, and his peculiar skill enabled the latter to secure this weapon which would throw suspicion upon the vagabond.

[THE END.]

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